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## She Shores

### *A Study on the Lives, Challenges and Resilience of Women of the Koli Fishing Community in Mumbai*

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### Abstract

This study delves into the lives of women from the Koli fishing community in Mumbai, aiming to illuminate their unique life experiences and the daily struggles that often remain hidden beneath their prosperous facade. It endeavours to examine their agency and adaptive strategies employed to navigate these challenges. The research was conducted in Pachubandar, Vasai, located in the western suburbs of Mumbai, which stands as one of the prominent Koli settlements in the city. Employing a qualitative research approach coupled with an exploratory research design, the study engaged ten participants, comprising seven Koli women and three key informants from the community. Additionally, an observational analysis of four retail and wholesale fish markets in Mumbai was conducted to gain insight into the working conditions of Koli fisherwomen.

This study adopts a gender-focused perspective to scrutinise the contextual vulnerabilities that shape the lives of Koli women. It underscores the paradox wherein, despite playing a pivotal role in sustaining both their families and the traditional fishing occupation, their contributions often go unnoticed. The Koli women face severe deprivation due to their limited access to property and decision-making

authority. They find themselves entangled within traditional norms and patriarchal structures, which impede their access to essential assets and diverse livelihood resources. Although they significantly contribute to the fishery sector, their struggles, needs, and aspirations are frequently disregarded due to their lack of representation and involvement in decision-making bodies. The majority of these women work under precarious conditions, devoid of proper infrastructure, resources, and security. Furthermore, the evolving dynamics within the fishery sector, driven by rapid urbanisation and modernisation, have a profound impact on the lives and traditional livelihoods of Koli women. They now confront issues such as dwindling fish catches due to environmental degradation, heightened market competition, reduced livelihood spaces brought about by shifting urban and coastal landscapes, altered labour relations, and technological advancements. Consequently, they find themselves caught between the conflicting forces of tradition and modernity. The research also sheds light on the strategies devised by Koli women to resist and adapt to the uncertainties and challenges they encounter, ultimately safeguarding their livelihoods through self-organisation. The study emphasises the imperative to acknowledge their contributions as 'visible work' and advocates for the incorporation of gender considerations when formulating policies and development strategies within the fisheries sector.

### **Keywords**

Koli fishing community – gender lens – livelihood struggles – vulnerability – coping strategies – fisheries sector – gender-inclusive policies

## **1 Introduction**

The Kolis of Mumbai are the fishing community who are known to be the original residents of the city. Mumbai which is also popularly known as 'Mayanagri' or the 'City of Dreams' is one of the largest cities in India. According to the Census 2011, the total population of Mumbai is 18.4 million and is spread over a land area of 437 sq. km. It is the commercial hub of India and contributes four per cent of the country's GDP. However, this fast-growing city also had a humble beginning and it is said that the Kolis played an important role in its formation. Years ago when Mumbai was still Bombay the Kolis owned most of the land and their sea-going fishing vessels dotted the coastline. The Kolis has given a name and life to this island city. It is said that the name of the seven Islands which comprised Mumbai has been named by the Kolis however some changes have been made there after. Appolo Bunder was 'Palva Bunder' Colaba was 'Kolabhat'

(Sharma, 2018). The other names given by the Kolis: Worli, Mazagaon, Naigaon and Dongri have managed to remain the same over the years. The legend says that the name of the city Mumbai was coined after “Mumba Devi” the name of the goddess worshipped by the kolis (Sharma, 2018). Today Mumbai is a city of hustle and bustle where millions of people with millions of dreams come all the time. However, it is extraordinary to see that within this busy life of a modern metropolis, a traditional fishing community has survived and has continued to pursue its traditional livelihood amidst all the odds. Their love for the sea and fishing can be reflected in their lifestyle, costumes, dance forms, cuisine and their culture in general. The women of the community play a very significant role in holding and keeping their traditions alive. They make vital contributions to the traditional livelihood and are highly involved in the post-harvest sector and throughout the marketing chain. A gender-based division of labour is present in the community in which the Koli men sail into the sea to catch fish and most of the rest of the work from sorting, cleaning, drying, packing and selling the fish catch in the market is a Koli women’s job. They provide tremendous economic support to the family by indulging in the business and this has been practiced for ages. If one visits the fish markets of Mumbai, he or she will be welcomed by the site of Koli women in their colourful attire selling fish and bargaining with their customers. Fish markets in Mumbai are incomplete without their presence. Because of their high visibility in the fish markets, they have also been tagged as the ‘Queen of Fish Markets’. They have been known for their quarrelsome nature and have always been portrayed as strong, dominating and independent women. However, the other side of the story which is the struggle that they go through daily is often overlooked. Life of a Koli woman is not as easy as it seems, behind their prosperous appearance there are stories of hard work and sacrifices. They have been entrusted with the role of housekeeping, caregiving and reproductive activities along with supplementing the family’s income by working inside and outside fisheries (Peke, 2013). Even though they make equal or more contributions in terms of the workload their efforts are often less recognised. The patriarchal structure and other traditional norms and institutions in place restrict them from equal access to property rights and livelihood resources. They also lack decision-making space because of which most of their struggles and needs get neglected. They have to negotiate and compete with diverse social factors in retaining their livelihood spaces, accessing relevant resources, and coping and sustaining their traditional livelihood practices. Through this study, the researchers try to provide an insight into the lives of the Koli women. It tries to bring out their stories, lived experiences and day-to-day livelihood struggles that often go unheard. It attempts to analyse different factors that affect

their lives and further tries to highlight how they have organised themselves to overcome these challenges. The study is conducted through a gender lens and it also focuses on understanding the gender-based labour present in the community, their agency and the role and status that they hold within their family and livelihood spaces.

## 2 Understanding the Koli Way of Life

The origin of the term 'Koli', has diverse explanations. According to Da Cunha, the word Koli has been derived from the Sanskrit word 'Kula' which means 'Clan' hence Kolis can be considered a 'clansman' (Peke, 2013). However, the meaning of the same word in Marathi is 'Spider' most probably because of the similarity of action between spiders and fishermen as both catch prey using their nets. Another interpretation of the word is that 'Kol' means a boat hence the person who steers the boat is called 'Koli (Verma, 1970). The Kolis possess a very rich history and heritage, some records prove that they are the original inhabitants of Mumbai. It is impossible to talk about the history of Mumbai without mentioning them. They have been staying in this Island city since the very beginning of time and have played a major role in its formation which is why they are also called 'Mumbaiche Raje' which means the 'Kings of Mumbai'. The Gazetteer of the old Bombay Presidency of Colaba District once stated that the Kolis of Mumbai are "*older than the Coconut palm, older than the Bhandari palm tapper are the Koli fishing folk of Bombay among whom, if in anyone tribe, one must seek for the blood of the men of the Stone Age*" (Harad and Joglekar, 2019). The traces of Kolis can be found in the written as well as the oral history of the city and some of the stories and myths depict their ancestral presence even back to the history of Ramayana (Mundhe, 2019). Some of the records indicate their presence in the islands of Mumbai since the 12<sup>th</sup> century. It is said that in 1138 C.E. when the King of Champaner, Pratap Bimba wrested control of the islands, the Kolis were already inhabiting there (Ranade S., 2008). Some historical evidence shows that in the year 1530, when the Portuguese took control over the region from the Sultan of Ahmedabad the region consisted of only 400 households, comprising of bhandaris, pachkalshis and Kolis (Madgaonkar, 1863). The Book written by Gerson Da Cunha which was published in the year 1883 titled "The Origin of Bombay" talks about the history of Mumbai during time of the British rule. Da Cunha describes old Bombay as the 'desolate islet' of the Koli fishermen. It tells us that Mumbai was before a cluster of seven islands and all these islands were occupied by the

Koli fisher folks, even before the British ever stepped their feet into the region. When the region came under British rule the second governor of Mumbai, Sir Gerald Angier started the programme of reclamation of these islands. The city of Mumbai today is a union of these fishing villages (Peke, 2013). It is said that the names of these Islands have been given by the Kolis. However, with time some of these names have been changed while some have managed to maintain their originality. The names of the Islands Palva Bunder, Kolabhat, Mazagaon, Worli, Dongri and Naigaon were given by the kolis. However, Palva Bunder distorted Apollo Bunder and Kolabhat became Colaba. Even the smaller Islands near Colaba which is also famously known as the Old Woman's Island or Old Man's Island a contortion of the Arab name 'Al-Omani' which was given for the same fisher folks who sailed as far as the Gulf of Oman. However, with the growth of a modern city by reclaiming more and more lands 'The Kings of Mumbai' were slowly pushed to the strands of the city. They have been pushed to the fringes near Cuffe Parade and Backbay from where they piled their ancient deep-water fishing activity.

### 2.1 *Identity*

The Kolis speak a variant dialect of Marathi which is called Agri. Originally the Kolis of Mumbai belonged to the ethnic Marathi group. The kolis were mainly Hindus before and followed their indigenous rituals and customs. However, the rule of the Portuguese over Bombay led to the conversion of the Kolis to Christianity as well (Peke, 2013). The city of Vasai which is the area under study is now home to the majority of Christian Koli settlements. If one visits the area he or she will be welcomed by the site of the famous Vasai Fort which is also known as Bassien Fort and Church built by the Portuguese in the 11<sup>th</sup> Century. The koliwadras in Vasai are built around this fort. Kolis from both the religion Hinduism and Christianity belong to the same ethnic group. However, they have also segregated themselves into sub-castes. Some of these castes like Tokare Kolis, Mahadeo Kolis, Dhor Kolis and Dongar Kolis are included in the Schedule Tribes list while the subcastes of the Kolis like Mangela Koli and Gabit Koli are included in the OBC Category. (Peke, 2013).

### 2.2 *Habitations*

The Kolis are mainly found settled in and around the city of Mumbai, along the Thane coasts and in the Raigad district as well. Some of these scattered settlements are also seen spread along Konkan from Vasai-Virar to Ratnagiri. Currently, there are 23 Koli villages in total in the city of Mumbai, which are mainly fishing villages (Harad and Joglekar, 2019). They have been residing in

the coastal area of the city for ages which is why the place of their settlement is locally known as 'Koliwad' which means 'a home which opens to the sea'. The availability of marine resources near the coastal areas played a vital role in their traditional fishing activity. One can see Koliwad located near the creeks along the coast as the unique physical structure of the area acts as a natural fishing ground and harbour for their traditional livelihood practices. The Colaba Koliwad, Worli Koliwad, Vasai Koliwad and Sion Koliwad are some of the prominent Koliwads in Mumbai (Chakrabarty, 2016).

### 2.3 *Fishing and Their Tradition*

Fishing is an integral part of their life it has always been their traditional occupation and a major source of livelihood. The majority of Kolis living in and around Mumbai are still earning their living off the sea even though a very different world is growing all around them. Even today one can find them at the time of dawn in the Sassoon Dock continuing their daily business since the late 1800s. In a traditional Koli family, everyone gets involved in the fishing business. The Koli men risk their lives to sail in the sea for fish harvesting because of which they are also locally known as "Darya ka Raja" which means the "King of the Sea". The women of the community handle the post-harvest activity. Their love for the sea and fishing can be reflected in their culture and lifestyle. From their dance forms to festivals everything reflects the importance of their traditional occupation.

### 2.4 *The Koli Women*

The Koli women would certainly attract the attention of anyone around her even in crowded spaces. Their presence is quite noticeable be it in the Mumbai local trains, fish markets or on the beaches of the Mumbai coast. The struggle that they face while entering into the crowded local trains of Mumbai carrying big containers full of fish, the adjustment they have to make in order to settle into that crowded space, the smell of the fish and also their readiness to sell the fish if given a chance even in that crowded train itself grabbed the researcher's gaze and attention. Their struggle, strength and hardworking nature distinguish them from others in such spaces. Some people generally perceive them to be very argumentative and that they always negotiate aloud in a very bold and assertive manner. From a layman's perspective, the women of the Koli community are known for their forthright nature and temperament. Because of this, they are locally called 'Kolin'. This is a Marathi word that means fisherwoman and is also a synonym word for 'a quarrelsome and abusive woman' (Punekar 1959). However, behind this bold, strong and independent appearance, they are also very caring. The women in the Koli

community are been involved in their traditional occupation since childhood. From a very young age from about six to seven years, they become a helping hand to their mother in the domestic chores, look after their siblings and also provide indulgence in the business. They play a very significant role in the post-harvest fishing sector which is not just about selling fish in the market. They also have to be indulged in multiple activities from spreading and weaving nets to sorting, cleaning, drying and selling the fish catch in the market. They also have to take care of the work like supplying rice, water and other ration and grocery things for the next trip to the boat. However, in spite of contributing equally in terms of the labour and workload their efforts are less recognised.

The number of fisherwomen is comparatively lesser than that of fishermen in Mumbai. There are a total of 770 informal and 661 formal fish markets in Mumbai (Peke, 2013). One can find Koli women in these fish markets apart from the shores and drying lands being indulged in their livelihood activity. However, even within these spaces, they have to fight for their recognition and rights. In Marol Dry Fish Market which is among the largest fish markets under BMC, the women are seen fighting for basic amenities like proper lighting, security, sanitation and hygiene in their daily occupations (Telang, 2019). Despite living in the commercial hub of the nation and also making equal contributions in the economic sector, the Koli women are still suffering from depleting and limited resources. Their everyday battles go unnoticed. Even though the Koli women are trying to adapt themselves according to the rapid changes that are taking place around them, their role and recognition are still very limited and unrecognised.

### 2.5 *Kolis and the Changing Dimensions of the Fishery Sector in Mumbai*

The Kolis have been traditionally reliant on the coastal and marine resources for their living. Until a few years ago, they were dependent on the resources that were locally available for fishing such as hand-woven cotton nets, bamboo and wooden gears and boats. The women of the Koli community were largely seen drying their fish catch at the open beaches and drying lands near the shores. Because of their traditional and localised knowledge, they were able to preserve their traditional livelihood for a long time. However, with time the rapid urbanisation of Mumbai modernisation of the fishery sector and other technological changes and advancements have largely influenced changes in the dimensions of the fishery sector and affected the livelihood security of the traditional native fisher folks.

The onset of modernisation of the fishery sector began post-independence in the late 1950s. This brought in many changes like the coastal landscapes and limited its access. This also brought in the introduction of advanced

technologies and gears such as large nylon nets, mechanised motor boats and crafts. Further, this resulted in the inflow of new forces and actors entering into the fishery sector. They were majorly business-minded people with more capital to invest in advanced fishing gears and technologies. Gradually they also started to dominate the post-harvest fishery spaces. These led to the marginalisation of the fishing community from their own livelihood spaces.

The liberalisation of the economy in the 1990s resulted in more problems in the forms of more resource exploitation and competition in the fisheries sector (Mundhe, 2019). All these have further aggravated the vulnerabilities of the traditional fisher folks.

The rapid urbanisation of Mumbai on a large scale has created many problems and affected the lives of the native fisher folks. A large part of the sea and the coastal lands have been encroached and reclaimed. Mangroves which are the breeding grounds for the fish have been hacked and destroyed. Mumbai being one of the most populated cities dumps its sewage with minimal treatment into the sea which contaminates the water. Pollution, mangrove destruction, coastal development, Surveys by ONGC, entry of foreign trawlers and overfishing are leading to a decline in fish catch and profit (Bunsha, 2007). The catch per boat has gone down because of overfishing and overcapacity. In Maharashtra, trawlers should be limited to 2,500 but currently, there are more than 4000 trawlers (Mathew, 2016). According to CMFRI, certain fish species like silver Unicorn Cod, Rawas, Pomfret and Sand Lobster which were abundant before are reaching what is called 'fish extinction' (Mathew, 2016). These transitions have influenced the lives of the kolis who were once known for their unique habitat, culture and occupation. Talking about the women of the community they are more vulnerable to this changing scenario as now they have to compete and negotiate with various forces and actors in their livelihood space.

### 3 Case Vignettes

The study includes seven respondents in total with seven Koli women and three key informants from the community. This chapter includes the stories and profiles of these eight respondents to understand them better. The names of the respondents have been changed in order to maintain confidentiality.

#### 3.1 *Asha and Her Hope for Better Days*

One of the 8 siblings her journey began from a struggling home. From a very young age, she joined the fishing business watching her mother and aunts

invest their time in it. She and her elder sister would help them in cleaning and drying fish instead of being in school. Education was not considered to be important during those times and also due to financial crisis she could never attend school. Her family's deprivation obliged her and her sister to engage in the fishing business in order to support the family and make ends meet. It's been more than 50 years now that she has been involved in this business. She got married at a very early age. After her wedding, her struggles continued to overlap. Beginning with her husband facing disability due to an accident which took all the burden of the family on her shoulders. She has been managing everything from looking after her husband and three children to drying and selling fish in the market. She has been working day and night to earn and feed her family. There were times when they could not afford three times meals a day. During those times even her relatives did not offer a helping hand to her. Indeed it became very tough for her but she did not give up. Shedding her blood and sweat she was able to provide basic education to her children. Now two of her daughters are already married and one stays with her and supports her in maintaining the house and looking after her husband. She is 60 years now and even today at this age she works extremely hard. As her husband cannot go to the sea she does not have her boat and resources. She works under someone else where she is hired to clean and dry fish the whole day under the hot scorching sun for which she gets 150–200 per day. Whatever is being earned is spent on household expenses and on treating her husband. She feels sick most of the time and faces health issues like weakness, severe body aches and stomach aches. But she does not have the time and money to show a doctor. The rights of the property are owned by her brother-in-law. She has lent a lot of money from different sources which she has to repay every month with interest. Even after facing so much hardship, she has a very positive outlook on life. The hope that one day everything will be fine has been motivating her for years to keep going no matter what.

### 3.2 *Rukmini's Story of Struggle and Responsibilities*

Rukmini is 44 years old she has been engaged in the fishing business since she was a little girl. She used to attend school as well as help her mother and other female family members in fish processing. She attended school till class 8 After that at the age of 17 she got married to a joint family. During the initial days of her marriage, she saw her mother-in-law suffering a lot due to a financial crisis. Her father-in-law used to spend a maximum of the money on alcohol and gambling as he is addicted to it. Her mother-in-law lost her life due to cancer and after her mother-in-law's death, all the responsibilities came to her as she is the eldest daughter-in-law in the family. Her husband and other

male members except her father in law go to the sea to catch fish. They return after 10–12 days. During this time Rukmini has to look after the entire family alone. She has to look after the household chores, her children and also the fish market. Her husband does not earn much from the fishing business these days because of the decline in profit margin. Due to this Rukmini has to work extra hard to sustain the family. She has three children and all of them go to school. She is ready to sacrifice everything to provide a good education and life for her children. Even today the head of the household is her father-in-law. Rights to property and resources are owned by her father-in-law, husband and other male members of the family.

### 3.3 *Holding on to the Tradition: Neelam's Story*

Being born and brought up in a traditional fishing community Neelam learned about it from a very young age. She is 23 years old now and is one of the youngest among her other 4 siblings. She grew up helping her mother and aunts in their traditional fishing business. However, after completing her class 10 she has completely devoted herself to it. Everyone in her family has been involved in this for generations. Neelam along with her other female family members are primarily involved in the dry fish selling business however they also sell fresh fish in the market. As they are not allowed to go into the sea for fish resources they have to be dependent on the male members or have to buy it from the wholesale market. Neelam's day starts at 4 am, After helping in domestic work she spends her entire day sorting, cleaning and drying the fish. It needs a lot of hard work and patience as it requires sitting and working the whole day in the same position under the sun. However, whatever is earned goes to her eldest aunt who manages the account of their business as well as household expenses. In the absence of the male members, all the important decisions are taken by her eldest aunt. However, the ownership of the assets is in the name of the male members. Though she does not get much in return for her hard work she is happy that she is helping her family and is contributing to sustaining their traditional business.

### 3.4 *Puja's Story of Faded Dreams*

Some upbringing begins with hardships and so did hers. She lost her mother at a very early age due to cancer after which all the responsibilities shifted on her shoulders. She is 19 years old and has to look after the entire household and her younger siblings. Her father is most of the time away from home in the sea for fish harvesting. During his absence, she has to manage everything alone. She dropped out of school after class 10 because of the responsibilities and work burden. She wanted to study further and become a nurse but as her

father does not earn much from fishing she had to give up on her dreams in order to support the family and send her siblings to school. She has learned to work from her mother and now she is doing what her mother used to do. Her entire day is spent in buying and selling fish and also in reproductive work without proper rest and recreation. Her life dangles around survival and her dream to become a nurse seems to slowly fade away.

### 3.5 *Heeru the Only Breadwinner of the Family*

She started working in this sector when she was 10 years old. She did not have the privilege to attend school. She got married at a very early age. After 9 years of her marriage, her life took an unfortunate turn with the tragic death of her husband after which she had to move out of her in-law's house. Baring the responsibilities of her 2 children alone she has to work every day from morning till night in order to run her family. She stays in a rented house with her children and sometimes it becomes very difficult for her to pay the rent and electricity bill. However, her daughter who is just 8 years old provides a helping hand to her. She does not possess ownership of any assets or resources. Along with the reproductive work, buying and selling fish she also works as a domestic helper in other's houses to sustain the family. Being the only breadwinner of the family, it gets difficult for her. She feels very stressed and lonely at times. She sometimes regrets not being able to attend school and acquire an education otherwise she could have done something else and could have provided a better life for her children.

### 3.6 *Rani's Struggle with an Abusive Partner*

She got married at the age of 19 years. However, after marriage, she had to be the victim of violence and abuse in her husband's house. Her husband is into alcohol and gambling. He used to spend all the money on it. When asked to stop he used to physically abuse her. During that time she used to go and sell fish in the Pachubandar market to earn some money even with a small baby because that was the only thing she knew to do. It's been two years now that she got separated from her husband and has moved to her brother's place along with her four-year-old child. Now she helps in their family business. However, a very small amount of money earned from fish marketing stays with her for personal expenses. The rest goes to her sister-in-law who manages the house. She has no resources or property in her name. The important decisions in the house are taken by her brother.

### 3.7 *Following God's Will: Meenal's Story*

Meenal was born and brought up in Pachubandar. She was raised in a family which was entirely dependent on fishing for livelihood. She never attended school instead she helped her family by indulging herself in the activity. She got married at the age of 16 years to a joint family. Even after marriage, she has continued to do so. She is 50 years old now and it has been around 41 years that she has been involved in this sector. She is mainly involved in the dry fish business and hires people to work under her. Before she also used to sell fresh fish but now due to health issues she has stopped doing so as she is unable to carry big baskets and travel anymore. She complains about how changes in the fishing sector have affected her business. She is the eldest daughter-in-law of the family so she is the one who manages the accounts of the money earned from dry fish vending. She has 5 children all of them got married. Her children are also involved in the fishing business. Even today all the important decisions in the family are taken by her father-in-law and ownership of assets is also mainly in his name. She has a strong belief that fishing is something that God has assigned them and they must follow God's will.

## 4 Discussions

The women of the Koli community are known for their strong and bold personalities and the autonomy that they 'seem to enjoy' at their work and in the community. It is believed that Koli women enjoy a more liberal status than women of any other community. There is no doubt that they are not strong. Their strength is reflected in the battles that they fight and overcome on a daily basis to sustain their family and their traditional occupation. However, just like other marginalised women in other communities the traditional patriarchal norms and structures subjugate their lives. The study found out that the women of the Koli community are entangled within the complex web of traditional patriarchal structures and norms and along with this they are also affected by the changes that are taking place in the fishery sector with the process of modernisation. The women of the community are stuck between the forces of tradition and modernity. The process of urbanisation that accompanied modernisation in the fishery sector has affected the lives of the Koli women and their livelihood spaces. Marine resources have been extensively exploited and access to coastal land and fish resources by the Koli women has also been reduced. There are entries of new forces within the sector that influence their livelihood spaces. The traditional practices and structures in place have restricted their control of these resources and the new forces and structures of

modernity have lessened their access to these resources. Both the structures of patriarchy and modernisation have a play in their life and shapes and reshapes the system (Waters, 1989).

Certain traditional beliefs and practices reinforce the elements of patriarchy in both private as well as public spaces. These elements are so much incorporated within the system that it has been routinised in the life of the women of the Koli community that sometimes they become the gatekeepers of it. The obligation to follow and keep the traditional beliefs, values and practices intact within the community is mostly vested with women. The imposition of these traditional beliefs and norms produces self-restraint and the feminine role of tolerance among the Koli women (Dube, 1988). For instance, it has been observed that the women themselves consider that they are physically weaker than the men which is why they avoid going into the sea even though they can carry heavy containers of fish on their heads every day to and from the market. They agree that as women they have to attend the reproductive works because there is a belief that it is their duty that no matter what women have to be at home and look after their family. Also, similarly, it can be observed that women themselves strictly avoid going into the boat or being part of any rituals during their menses there is a belief that they are impure during those days and this might violate the customary norms that might bring bad luck for the family and also the community.

The ideology that men are superior and that women are dependent on them remains stronger even though they earn and bring income for the survival of the family (Samuel, 2007). Because of this practice, there is a belief that in a family the sources of resources come through men only.

One of the key factors of the vulnerability of the Koli women is their lack of access to decision-making spaces and livelihood resources. The Koli women possess very limited control or authority over the coastal resources most of them even do not have control over the money that they earn from fish vending (Kulkarni, 2007). Most of it is spent on family and household expenses. The men of the community hold control over the livelihood resources and the Koli women have to be dependent on them to access it. The cultural mediation through which they access resources does not guarantee their security and right over these assets (Agarwal, 1988). The traditional beliefs and practices do not provide ownership and authority to access the livelihood resources to the Koli women which raises serious concerns on their livelihood security. They do not even have the right to property over boats or land. It is always in the name of the male members of the family. Nevertheless, even access to the common lands such as shores or the drying spaces from where they seek out their everyday dry fish business has also become very limited most of it is

reclaimed. The elements of patriarchy that are present in the system of the community enable men to dominate over women. The gendered inequality that is present within the system tends to subjugate women and suppress their voices. The Koli women in the community are also victims of domestic abuse and violence. The women are also entrusted with the traditional gender roles. They have to indulge in post-harvest fishing activities and also simultaneously look after the family and other domestic chores. Along with this, they are also involved in activities like mending nets, baskets, and fishing hooks and providing services to the boat and so on. It has been observed that they have been entangled within it since their childhood. They get engaged in helping their mothers from a very young age. Most of them are also school dropouts because of a lack of family support for girl's education and also financial crisis. Early marriage has also been recorded where they have to take responsibility for an entire household from a very young age.

Though the technological advancements that modernisation and transition of fishery brought along have affected the livelihood of the traditional fisher folks in many ways it has somehow reduced the workload of Koli men with more mechanised gears and boats. However, it is not necessarily the same for the women of the community. Instead, they are overburdened with responsibilities and work. The process of modernisation took place in the fish harvesting sector only in order to increase production. However, it is observed that the technological changes within the post-harvest fishing sector in which women are extensively involved are still very minimal. They are still traced carrying baskets of fish on their head. The market spaces where they sit and engage in their daily transaction has also not developed. Even within those spaces, they are seen struggling with basic facilities like proper infrastructure, light, water supply, proper drainage system, storage facility etc. Thus, it can be said that women are left out of the framework and design of the process of modernisation and development. Though they have tried to develop coping strategies to deal with these uncertainties they still have to battle and struggle for limited livelihood resources. They are seen struggling daily to access transportation, water, fish and other resources. Other social and demographic determinants such as marital status, age, class etc. also tell the extent and nature of women's vulnerability (Jha & Pujari, 1998). For example, it has been observed that households headed by single women are in a more vulnerable status because they have no means or resources to support their livelihood. They have fewer opportunities for income and also lack resources like their own boat or land. Thus, the economic transformation and the process of

modernisation and coastal development have not necessarily increased or improved the status of Koli women. Their stories and experiences send the message that economic transformation or modernisation does not necessarily always reform or improve the social status of women or bring about gender equality.

## 5 Conclusion

Despite residing in the nation's commercial hub and making significant and equitable contributions to the fisheries sector, the concerns and endeavours of these women remain underappreciated. Their voices remain marginalised, not only within their families but also within their broader community and at the state level. They are denied the authority and space to voice their issues, a situation that has left them sidelined (Indira, 2007).

It is evident that both at the state and national levels, government policies have acknowledged the concerns of fishermen, albeit minimally, while completely overlooking the plight of women. Consequently, women are conspicuously absent from these policies and programs. Regrettably, the state has paid little attention to enhancing and elevating the status of women in the traditional fishing sector. Through this study, the researcher underscores the imperative and immediacy of integrating gender considerations into the formulation of development strategies and policies within the fisheries sector. The research aims to illustrate that, even today, gender disparities persist within traditional fishing families, where women have limited access to livelihood resources and derive minimal benefits from the modernisation process. Their struggles and concerns deserve to be brought to the forefront, granting them equal participation in power dynamics and decision-making processes within their families and the wider community.

It is crucial to recognise the invaluable role they play in preserving tradition and significantly contributing to economic development. Their work should be accorded the same recognition as 'visible work.' Addressing gender disparities requires meaningful efforts towards gender mainstreaming in the development of programs and policies related to the modernisation of the fisheries sector. In conclusion, it is imperative to heed the message that *"Investing in women's capabilities and empowering them to exercise their choices is not only intrinsically valuable but also the most reliable path to contribute to economic growth and development"* (UNDP, 2008).

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