



Problems Faced by Fisherwomen After Occupational Change: Evidence from Coastal Kerala

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ABSTRACT

Occupational mobility among fisherwomen is often perceived as a means of empowerment and socioeconomic advancement. Yet, post-transition challenges frequently hinder the sustainability of new livelihoods. This study examines the multifaceted problems encountered by fisherwomen in coastal Kerala after shifting from traditional fishing-based activities to alternative occupations. Using primary data from 311 respondents across the districts of Thiruvananthapuram, Kollam, and Alappuzha, the research identifies major marketing, personal, and technological constraints limiting their success. Descriptive statistics and independent t-tests reveal that both intra-sector and inter-sector shifters encounter significant issues, including poor market access, inadequate infrastructure, lack of training, and weak institutional support. The findings underscore the need for targeted interventions—particularly in marketing literacy, skill enhancement, and sustained institutional engagement—to ensure that occupational mobility translates into genuine and lasting empowerment.

Keywords: Fisherwomen, Occupational Change, Economic problems, Marketing Constraints, Personal Challenges, Technological Barriers, Kerala

1. Introduction

The fisheries sector has long been integral to the economic and cultural identity of coastal Kerala. Women in fishing communities contribute substantially to both pre- and post-harvest activities such as processing, vending, and marketing. However, declining fish resources, rising mechanization, and socioeconomic pressures have compelled many fisherwomen to explore alternative livelihoods. While this occupational shift promises improved living standards, it also introduces a new set of socioeconomic and personal/ psychological challenges.

Transitioning to other occupations often requires fisherwomen to navigate unfamiliar work environments, acquire new skills, and adjust to formal labour systems outside traditional community networks. This study investigates the marketing, personal, and technological problems these women face after occupational shifts, offering empirical insights drawn from Kerala's coastal belt.

2. Review of Literature with Theoretical Integration

Occupational mobility among fisherwomen in Kerala continues to be shaped by structural constraints and gendered inequalities that influence their post-shift experiences.

Marketing Problems

Post-occupational fisherwomen frequently encounter weak market linkages and poor bargaining power in both traditional and alternative sectors. Studies indicate that lack of access to organized markets, price fluctuations, and middlemen exploitation reduce their income security (Sathiadhas & Narayanakumar, 1994; Salim & Geetha, 2013). These constraints reflect the Market Exclusion Theory (Sen, 1999), which posits that institutional and informational barriers systematically restrict marginalized groups—especially women—from equitable market participation. The absence of market networks and gender-sensitive policies also aligns with Social Network Theory (Granovetter, 1973), emphasizing that limited relational capital weakens access to profitable markets and collective bargaining.

Personal Problems

Occupational shifts often intensify personal and psychological strains. Long working hours, workplace harassment, and gender discrimination are common in informal sectors (John Joseph, 2015; Shakir, 2017). These experiences can be explained through Feminist Standpoint Theory (Harding, 1991), which asserts that women lived experiences reveal systemic inequalities embedded in labour structures. Health issues such as fatigue, musculoskeletal pain, and mental distress are prevalent due to increased workload and poor occupational safety (Biswas & Rao, 2014; Hari Om Verma et al., 2015). Emotional detachment from traditional fishing identity further creates stress and alienation (Florentina, 2019; Atitkar, 2021), resonating with Role Conflict Theory (Kahn et al., 1964), which highlights psychological tension arising when traditional and new occupational roles clash.

Technological Problems

Technological unfamiliarity remains a major barrier to occupational adaptation. Many fisherwomen lack digital literacy and exposure to modern equipment or online platforms, limiting efficiency and earnings (Kanaga & Sivasankar, 2015). These challenges are consistent with Human Capital Theory (Becker, 1964), which emphasizes that productivity and income are closely tied to investment in education, skills, and training. Furthermore, the exclusion from digital platforms mirrors Technology Acceptance Theory (Davis, 1989), which explains that perceived ease of use and usefulness influence technology adoption—factors often constrained by gendered digital divides in marginalized communities (Macusi et al., 2021). Studies stress the need for gender-sensitive training and inclusive technological programs to enhance sustainability and empowerment.

3. Objectives of the Study

1. To identify the major marketing, personal, and technological problems faced by fisherwomen after occupational change.
2. To analyse the differences in these problems between intra-sector (within fisheries) and inter-sector (outside fisheries) occupational shifters.
3. To provide policy suggestions for enhancing fisherwomen's adaptability and empowerment in new occupational contexts.

4. Methodology

Data were collected from 311 fisherwomen in Thiruvananthapuram, Kollam, and Alappuzha who had transitioned to alternative occupations. Respondents were classified as:

Intra-sector shifters: Women who moved within fisheries-related jobs.

Inter-sector shifters: Women who shifted to non-fishery occupations.

A structured interview schedule captured their perceived difficulties across marketing, personal, and technological domains. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics and independent t-tests to assess group-wise differences. All scales demonstrated acceptable reliability (Cronbach's alpha > 0.70)

5. Results and Discussion

5.1. Personal, Marketing, and Technological Problems: Descriptive Analysis

The study attempted to examine whether the nature of employment shift undertaken by fisherwomen within the fisheries sector (intra-sector) or outside it (inter-sector) had any effect on the personal, marketing, and technological problems encountered after the occupational transition. Descriptive statistics were used to compare mean scores and standard deviations across both groups to identify variations in the intensity of problems faced. The results, presented in Table 5.1a, reveal the extent to which fisherwomen continue to experience challenges in personal adjustment, market participation, and access to technological resources in their new occupational settings.

Table 1 Personal, Marketing, and Technological Problems: Descriptive Analysis

Problem Category	Group	Mean	SD	Description of Level of Problems
Personal Problems	Intra-sector	3.311	0.909	Moderate to High level of personal difficulties (issues like low confidence, weak family/community support, and interpersonal conflicts)
	Inter-sector	3.262	0.929	Similar level of personal issues faced while adapting to new occupations
Marketing Problems	Intra-sector	2.713	0.943	Moderate marketing difficulties; lack of professional guidance, weak market access, and poor infrastructure

	Inter-sector	2.423	0.629	Relatively fewer marketing problems after shifting out of fisheries
Technological Problems	Intra-sector	2.417	0.646	Moderate technological challenges; lack of training, equipment, and institutional support
	Inter-sector	2.408	0.618	Comparable technological constraints across both groups

Source: Primary Data

Interpretation

The results indicate that both intra-sector (those who remained within fisheries-related occupations) and inter-sector (those who moved to non-fisheries jobs) fisherwomen continue to experience moderate levels of challenges across all three domains, though the intensity varies slightly between groups.

In terms of personal problems, both groups reported moderate to high levels of difficulty, reflecting the psychosocial strain associated with occupational change. Issues such as low self-confidence, weak family and community support, and interpersonal conflicts within the workplace were prevalent. Inter-sector fisherwomen recorded slightly higher mean scores (Mean = 3.262) than intra-sector respondents (Mean = 3.311), indicating that women who transitioned to non-fisheries occupations faced additional challenges in adapting to new social and professional environments. These findings are consistent with earlier studies that observed social alienation and reduced familial support during women's livelihood transitions (Tripathi, 2017; Shyam, 2011). The persistence of such personal challenges reveals that empowerment through occupational mobility requires not only economic adaptation but also emotional and social adjustment support.

Marketing problems were more pronounced among intra-sector fisherwomen (Mean = 2.713) compared to inter-sector fisherwomen (Mean = 2.423). This suggests that those who remained within fisheries-related activities continue to struggle with market-oriented barriers, including lack of professional guidance, poor market linkages, inadequate infrastructure, and limited bargaining power. The results resonate with prior findings by Sathiadhas and Narayanakumar (1994) and Antony et al. (2018), which emphasize that traditional fish marketing systems remain male-dominated and exploitative, offering little institutional or policy support to women. Conversely, women who moved into non-fisheries sectors reported slightly lower marketing constraints, implying some diversification benefits and improved access to structured markets or organized employment conditions.

Regarding technological problems, both intra- and inter-sector fisherwomen displayed similar mean scores (2.417 and 2.408 respectively), suggesting a shared struggle across occupational categories. Key issues included limited access to modern equipment, lack of technical training, and poor institutional responsiveness. These findings reflect systemic technological and infrastructural gaps within the coastal economy, where women often remain excluded from technology dissemination and extension programs (Salagrama, 2012; Rajeev & Koya, 2020). The absence of gender-sensitive technology adoption policies and institutional capacity-building mechanisms contributes to these persistent barriers.

5.2 Personal, Marketing, and Technological Problems: Independent T-test for Equality of Means

The independent t-test analysis (Table 2) was conducted to assess whether the nature of occupational shift—remaining within fisheries-related work (intra-sector) or moving to non-fisheries occupations (inter-sector)—had any significant effect on the magnitude of personal, marketing, and technological problems experienced by fisherwomen. This comparative statistical test provides insights into whether the shift in employment sector alters the level or type of constraints faced during livelihood transitions.

Table 2 Personal, Marketing, and Technological Problems: Independent T-test for Equality of Means

Problem Category	Group	N	Mean	SD	Df	t-Statistic	p-value
Personal Problems	Intra-sector	162	3.311	0.909	3091	0.468	0.640
	Inter-sector	149	3.262	0.929			
Marketing Problems	Intra-sector	162	2.713	0.943	2821	3.216	0.001*
	Inter-sector	149	2.423	0.629			
Technological Problems	Intra-sector	162	2.417	0.646	3091	0.107	0.914
	Inter-sector	149	2.408	0.618			
Note: Equal variance across groups							assumed
Significant at 0.05 level							

Source: Primary Data

The results reveal varying levels of difference between the two groups across the three categories of problems. For personal problems, the test yielded no statistically significant difference between intra-sector and inter-sector fisherwomen ($t = 0.468$, $p = 0.640$). This implies that both groups face comparable levels of personal challenges, such as lack of family and community support, low self-confidence, and difficulties adjusting to new work environments. These findings align with the Push–Pull Theory, which suggests that while economic and institutional factors may push or pull individuals toward new occupations, personal and social barriers often persist regardless of occupational change (Lee, 1966). Similarly, according to Human Capital Theory, unless social and educational investments are made to enhance women's skills, confidence, and adaptability, personal constraints are likely to remain a limiting factor in achieving empowerment and career advancement (Becker, 1964).

In contrast, marketing problems exhibited a statistically significant difference between the two groups ($t = 3.216$, $p = 0.001^*$), indicating that intra-sector fisherwomen experience considerably greater marketing-related difficulties compared to their inter-sector counterparts. The higher mean value among intra-sector respondents (Mean = 2.713) suggests continued dependence on informal and unregulated fish marketing systems characterized by exploitative intermediaries, low price control, and poor market infrastructure. These results reinforce earlier findings by Sathiadhas & Narayanakumar (1994) and Antony et al. (2018), who emphasized that traditional fish marketing remains a male-dominated space, leaving fisherwomen marginalized. By contrast, inter-sector fisherwomen—those who transitioned to more diversified occupations such as small-scale entrepreneurship, retail, or service-based work—appear to have benefited from relatively structured market access and improved income stability. This distinction reflects structural mobility, where broader economic transformations and diversification opportunities open new occupational avenues, enabling some women to overcome traditional market constraints.

For technological problems, the t-test results show no significant difference between the two groups ($t = 0.107$, $p = 0.914$), indicating that technological constraints are uniformly experienced across both intra- and inter-sector fisherwomen. Limited access to modern fishing equipment, inadequate technical training, and insufficient institutional support are systemic challenges affecting women in both traditional and non-traditional occupations. The persistence of these technological barriers reflects the institutional gap in gender-sensitive policy design and technology dissemination, as also observed by Rajeev & Koya (2020) and Salagrama (2012). This uniformity across groups implies that the issue is structural rather than occupational—arising from the overall exclusion of women from technological innovation and resource networks within the coastal economy.

6. Major Findings

The comparative analysis of personal, marketing, and technological problems reveals a distinct pattern in the post-shift experiences of fisherwomen.

Marketing challenges emerge as the most severe constraint, particularly among intra-sector fisherwomen who remain dependent on traditional, male-dominated fish markets characterized by limited price control and market access.

Personal problems—such as lack of family support, low confidence in new work environments, and role conflicts—persist across both groups, indicating that occupational mobility alone does not alleviate the underlying social and psychological barriers that affect women's empowerment.

Technological problems are found to be uniformly distributed across both groups, suggesting that systemic deficiencies in training, digital access, and innovation continue to restrict productivity and adaptation, regardless of occupational domain.

Taken together, these results indicate that while inter-sector transitions may reduce some market constraints, the persistence of personal and technological barriers limits sustainable empowerment. Effective policy responses must therefore address not only economic but also social, technological, and institutional determinants of women's occupational mobility and livelihood security.

7. Conclusion

This study underscores that occupational diversification among fisherwomen in Kerala, though a promising pathway toward empowerment, remains constrained by structural, technological, and personal challenges. Marketing barriers, emotional stress, and inadequate technical access restrict both economic advancement and social empowerment.

Addressing these issues requires integrated, gender-sensitive interventions that focus on:

- Enhancing marketing literacy and entrepreneurial training to improve negotiation skills and income diversification.
- Strengthening technological and digital skill development initiatives to foster adaptation and innovation.
- Institutionalizing continuous support mechanisms through coordinated efforts of state agencies, cooperatives, and local communities.

- Promoting family and community awareness programs to build emotional resilience and support women's occupational transitions.

Overall, occupational mobility among fisherwomen reflects a vital adaptive process to economic and social pressures. However, its transformative potential depends on addressing both push factors (economic distress, gender bias, weak institutional backing) and pull deficiencies (limited opportunities, inadequate training, and poor market access).

By combining capacity building, infrastructure development, and psychosocial support, Kerala can strengthen fisherwomen's resilience, enhance their empowerment, and promote sustainable, inclusive growth in coastal economies.

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