

# Vulnerable Women: Impact of Covid-19 Lockdown on the Livelihood of Fisherwomen in Kashmir

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**Abstract:** The Covid-19 pandemic had a severe impact on the livelihood of the vulnerable groups in India. Fisherwomen in Kashmir whose livelihood depends upon the selling of fish in the market was also affected by the lockdown imposed in post-March 2020. Being a Muslim woman from the marginalised social caste of 'Hanji', the fisherwomen experience vulnerabilities and gendered discrimination in private and public spaces. For the past three decades, armed conflict in Kashmir had proved to impede their mobility and access to safe market spaces. Over the years, these women have shown the resilience to overcome these socio-economic and political problems, but the recent Covid-19 pandemic is causing social and economic distress, adding to their existing vulnerabilities. Lack of infrastructure, such as fish storage facilities, insurance coverage and safe, designated fish markets force them to continue working during pandemic.

**Keywords:** Covid-19, Fisherwomen, Kashmir, Livelihood, Exclusion

## I. INTRODUCTION

Larger sections of the populations in India is in the informal sector. As per the recent National Sample Survey Organization survey, roughly 90 per cent of the labour force is in informal sector, out of which around 70 per cent earn less than Rs. 30 (0.6 \$) per day, making them the most vulnerable group in the economy. The workers in the informal sector in India tend to work at construction sites, homes, sidewalks, selling their products at market places, etc and they are not covered by any formal contracts and labour laws (Basu and Thomas, 2009). Either these works are the wages workers or self-employed running their own small businesses. The Covid-19 pandemic had a severe impact on the livelihood of the vulnerable groups belonging to the informal sector of economy in India in general and Jammu Kashmir in particular. Fisherwomen in the Union Territory Jammu Kashmir whose livelihood depends upon the selling of fish in the market was also affected by the lockdown imposed in post-March 2020. Being a Muslim woman from the marginalised social caste of 'Hanji', the fisherwomen experience vulnerabilities and gendered discrimination in private and public spaces. For the past three decades, armed conflict in Kashmir had proved to impede their mobility and access to safe market spaces. Over the years, these women have shown the resilience to overcome these socio-economic and political problems, but the recent Covid-19 pandemic is causing social and economic distress, adding to their existing vulnerabilities. Lack of infrastructure, such as fish storage facilities, insurance coverage and safe, designated fish markets force them to continue working during pandemic. Some welfare schemes amidst pandemic launched by the Central and State government have not proven inclusive for all the vulnerable groups. There is a need for policy intervention and creation of gender-responsive infrastructure at the state level, especially targeting the fisherwomen from the Hanji

community, without which the situation of poverty and social exclusion will continue.

Fisherwomen form one of the essential constituents of the informal sector in Kashmir (Quershi and Krishnan, 2015). Within the informal sector of economy in the Union territory of Jammu Kashmir, fisherwomen belong to the category of 'self-employed'. They depend upon the men-folk who catch the fish a day or two before. As they do not have any big cold storages, they are obliged to sell the fish on time, otherwise it turns to be perishable. Though there are fixed spaces on the roadsides to sell fish but neither these spaces are safe nor reliable. These fisherwomen who are economically backward have limited access to education and jobs in the formal sector. In addition, they face double burden of engaging in homemaking activities, such as caring for children, cooking and cleaning. Belonging to the socially and economically marginalised 'Hanji' community in a conflict- zone of Kashmir, the fisherwomen experienced vulnerabilities and gendered discrimination in the past. In the ladder of social hierarchy among Kashmiri Muslims, the Hanji Community are considered lower in rank and negative stereotyping is ascribed to the women from this community. Apart from this, Jammu Kashmir being the conflict-zone (Zia, 2019); the Covid has proven double burden on people in general and made women more vulnerable in particular. There have been periodic cycles of protests, curfews and public agitations for many years which have a direct effect on the lives of people, including fisherwomen. During these times, fishing is not done and even if the fisher men are able to catch the fish, fisherwomen are unable to sell the catch, leading to loss of income and livelihood. As their main economic activity depends upon selling fish in the market, the present disaster of Covid-19 affected their livelihood and drew them back to poverty. Therefore, in this paper I look at the impact of the Covid-19 on the livelihood of the fisherwomen from Kashmir valley. By looking at the everyday experience of the fisherwomen, the paper explores the socio-economic challenges faced by the fisherwomen. The social caste, religious identity, economic status and the space (conflict-zone) form the part of the identity as well as precursors of vulnerability for these women, so the overarching aim of the paper is to understand the intersection of gender, class, social caste, and space through the lived experiences of the fisherwomen and their resilience during the pandemic. Thus the paper focused on the following objectives:

1. To explore the impact of the Covid-19 on the livelihood of fisherwomen from Urban and Rural areas of Kashmir.
2. To highlight the moments of resilience asserted and sustained by the fisherwomen from urban and rural areas amidst the Covid-19 crisis.

## II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Although for the precautions, lockdown was imposed across India but there were problems which the people engaged in the informal sector faced. Sumalatha, Bhat, and Chitra (2020) looked at the impact of Covid-19 on the people engaged in the informal sectors of economy with a particular focus on women. They pointed out that either there has been a lack of consistency in national and sub-national policy recommendations to guide workplaces on how to prevent transmission and protect workers from COVID-19 or there has been no specific policies for the protection of marginalised communities, including working class women. It was not only in India but many states in the Global South failed to come up with a comprehensive plan to safeguard the interests and livelihood of people in the informal sector. In response to this World Health Organization (2020) came up with a policy which provided a comprehensive action points for governments and workplaces in implementing the relevant WHO and ILO recommendations on COVID-19 and occupational safety and health.

The paper from International Crisis Group (2020) explains that apart from the challenge to the public health, Covid-19 has put forth the political changes for the nation-states. This paper argues that the populations who live in the conflict-zones are likely to be especially vulnerable to outbreaks of disease. It points out that the prolonged conflict and unrest is compounded by mismanagement and corruption, which made the health institutions in this regions ill prepared for Covid-19. Further the paper points out that in the conflict-zones, it can be hard to persuade populations with little trust in government or political leaders to follow public health directives. Even in place like Jammu Kashmir where people are experiencing armed conflict for last three decades, the Covid-19 posed a big challenges and it was hard for the state government to implement the SoPs related to pandemic across the rural and urban areas.

In their research work on the impact of Covid on women, Nanthini and Nair (2020) argue that when it comes to differentiated impacts, women bear a disproportionate load of the adverse impacts of the pandemic. According to them, it is not only the livelihood of women that got affected by the pandemic but it has psychological impact on them. Looking at the cases from South East Asia, they argue that even in a double income household, women inadvertently take up the greater share of household responsibilities, including home-based learning with the majority of schools being shut. On the basis of their fieldwork, they point out that these responsibilities, on top of their own remunerated work, have increased their stress and compromised their psychological well-being. In addition, a large proportion of women work in informal sector jobs (discussed shortly) as well and economic lockdowns have merely exaggerated their insecurities.

There is no in-depth research conducted on the Hanji community or the fisherwomen in Kashmir. Earlier historical works (Lawrance, 1992 and Khan, 1978) have pointed out the social marginalisation of the Hanji community. Most of these works looks at the social discrimination that the community faced at the hands of elite educated class. Some recent scholarship (Rather and Bhat, 2017) look at the correlation between the income and the empowerment of fisherwomen in the private sphere, while other works point out the vulnerabilities faced by them due to lack of social security (Farooqi, Rasool and Shamin, 2018) or the constrains due to lack of infrastructure (Bhat and Sharma 2021). Similar

vulnerabilities are highlighted in the works (Lina, 2014 and Priya and Drerangandhan, 2016) on the fisherwomen in other parts of India. Without employing gender and intersectionality frameworks, these works fail to acknowledge the everyday resilience of these women. These works lack critical engagement with the state policy interventions vis-a-vis fisherwomen.

## III. METHODOLOGY

Being a Muslim woman from the marginalised social caste of 'Hanji' community, the vulnerabilities experienced by fisherwomen are different from 'other' women. So the intersectionality (Mohanty, 1984 and Mattson, 2014) provides a scope to examine the resilience exercised by fisherwomen against the socio-economic challenges. To incorporate the perspectives and understanding from the ground, this paper adopted community based participatory research approach. The research focused on the fisherwomen from the Urban and Rural areas of the Kashmir valley, for which two districts - Srinagar and Anantnag. These two districts which comprise of multiple water bodies which is a source of fishing for the Hang community. Apart from being habituated by the Hanji community, these two districts provide the space in the form of market places where the fisherwomen sell their fish. In terms of socio-economic status and other vulnerabilities, there are differences among the Hanji community from Urban area like Srinagar and Rural area, like Anantnag. The paper examined the resilience exercised by the fisherwomen from rural and urban areas and highlight the differences if any.

For this research, a semi-structured questionnaire in English and Kashmiri was used to interview the participants (fisherwomen) to obtain information about their daily activities, socio-economic problems they faced and the difficulties faced during the recent Covid-19. Before the start of each interview, I, along with my research field assistants, will explain the objectives of this research work clearly to fisherwomen and other participants of the research so that they can give their consent. It was also made clear to these women activists that they were under no compulsion to answer a question which made them uncomfortable. The interview questions used for this study included the items on occupation, family relations, work activities, income, aspirations, government policies, Covid-19 and its impact on them. Semi-structured questionnaire for the interviews was helpful, which provided the participants with a lot of space to express their views, hopes and experiences rather than being restricted to only specific sub-themes.

For the information on the interventions from the state Government, Focus Group Discussion (FGD) was employed. It involved group discussion among the participants collectively upon the topics or questions raised by the researcher and allowed them to engage with each other critically. I used the Day Reconstruction Method to understand the daily experience of fisherwomen in a marketplace and their subjective well-being amidst Covid-19 (Kahneman et.al, 2004). It helped reconstruct the everyday life of fisherwomen from the dawn when they go along with men for fishing to dusk when they complete their job of selling a maximum portion of fish in the basket. Moreover, this method helped to reflect upon the changes that occurred in their daily lives due to Covid-19 and what kind of mechanism they adopted to remain safe and continue with their fish work in the market places.

**A. Covid-19 and Impact On The Livelihood**

Fisherwomen in Kashmir hail from the marginalized 'Hanji' community. Apart from being economically and educationally backwards, this community is considered lower in the social caste hierarchy. Fishing is the primary source of livelihood for this community. Over the period, the new generation has also picked up other forms of livelihood, such as selling the vegetables and dry fruits in the markets nearby lakes and rivers, offering the shikharas rides for the tourists and running the small grocery shops in their locality. A small section of educated youth is in government and private jobs. Most of the population among the Hanji community is engaged in selling fish. There is a division of labour within the family; men folk take the responsibility of catching the fish in the lakes and rivers, while as women are responsible for selling the fish in the market. There are no well-established and separate market places for the fisherwomen. Most of them sell their fish on the pedestals of busy roads, on the bridges of the main towns or outside the mosques and shrines. Fisherwomen travel long distances from their homes to reach these places, and from dusk to dawn, they are seen on these spots, waiting for their customers. As there is no facility for the preservation of fish, they intend to sell their fish within two days after the catch, and at times they have to return back without any sales. One of the respondents, while sharing the problems attached to this business, said *I reach the market in the early morning to sit in the right spot where I can catch the attention of my customers. Not many people are interested in buying fish from us. Customers bargain a lot, and we end up selling the fish at lower prices.*<sup>i</sup>

The post-March 2020 lockdown amidst Covid-19 had a drastic impact on the livelihood of these fisherwomen. The government in the Union Territory of Jammu Kashmir imposed strict restrictions on the movement of the people. All the businesses were closed continuously for six months. The second lockdown followed it from April 2021 onwards for five months. Before this, the valley of Kashmir had witnessed the communication blockade and curfews after the abrogation of Article 370 in 2019. The families in the Hanji community whose income depended on selling fish experienced financial problems. Under the strict restriction imposed by the government authorities, the men in the community could not go fishing. Some of them managed to take risks and fish during the night-time, while others went to the small ponds and distant places for fishing. But it was the fisherwomen who experienced the direct impact of the Covid-19 restrictions.

Firstly, there was no fish to sell, as it was difficult for their menfolk to go fishing amidst the pandemic. Secondly, even if the fish was made available to them by men, they could not sell it as the market spaces were closed down. One respondent who has been selling the fish for the last two decades said *it was the first time in my business career that I could not sell the fish. Being only earning hand, my family depended on me, and I was not able to earn anything.*<sup>ii</sup> Thirdly, the pandemic protocols required the social distancing, so even when the fisherwomen managed to take their fish out for sale in the interiors of the towns, there were no customers to buy it. A young school educated fisherwoman shared her experience, *as me and my mother managed to fetch some fish from the neighbour and went to the interiors of downtown in Srinagar, there were no customers. Some of the people who were on the roadside asked us to go back.*<sup>iii</sup> They talked in a short tune and said that we would spread the virus by selling the fish. In normal times, the fisherwomen will earn Rs/-3500 to Rs/- 6000 a month by selling the fresh fish in the market. Apart from taking care of

the basic day-to-day amenities, these women have taken the responsibility of educating their children. *I do not want my children to continue in the same business, so I wanted them to be educated in an excellent private school,* said a respondent.<sup>iv</sup> During the lockdown amidst Covid, the fisherwomen remained without any earnings for months. Whatever savings they had managed for the last decade was all spent for survival. It had an impact on the education of their children too. Many schools in the valley shifted to an online mode of teaching, but the children of these fisherwomen could not avail the of online education due to the lack of modern phones and computers. Some of them had to spend the money they had saved for their children's marriages.

**B. Resilience of the Fisherwomen**

The fisherwomen are faced with many challenges, belonging to the socially marginalized and economically backward 'Hanji' community. Many social taboos and stereotypes associated with the community-made the fisherwomen vulnerable on many accounts. Moreover, their livelihood in the unorganized sector, selling the fish at the market spaces, fetched them a low monthly income, forcing them to take the loans from the local money lenders. Out of their income, a significant portion goes to the monthly instalments. As one of the respondents said, *though I have been working for a decade now, I do not have any savings. I have to spend on the household requirements and whatever is left that is to be paid back against the loan that I took when my mother was sick.*<sup>v</sup> In addition, fisherwomen also faced problems going to the market due to the uncondusive political atmosphere in Jammu Kashmir. There have been incidents of violence in the main towns, and the fisherwomen had to run for their lives. The fisherwomen exhibited their resilience by overcoming hardships. It is fisherwomen who shoulder more responsibility; on the one side, they have been taking care of the household work, and on the other hand, they also go out to earn. The women worked extra hours to overcome the low income and ventured into different market spaces to sell their fish. They will also pay back the monthly instalments of loans out of their earnings. In times of political turmoil, they risked their lives and reached the market spaces in the early morning. While the government imposed curfews and shutdowns, the fisherwomen would walk through the alleys of the old town to find the customers. A respondent shared this; even during curfews, *I used to go out to sell my fish. I will go to the old town. As the customers could not come to market, I used to take fish to their doorsteps.*<sup>vi</sup>

The lockdown amidst Covid-19 created additional problems for them. As already discussed, it had an impact on their livelihood as well as their social life. But the fisherwomen had shown the resilience they exhibited in the past. It was difficult for their menfolk to go out fishing during the first lockdown. The fisherwomen joined them for the fishing at night time. At times, they travel to rural areas and fetch fish from there. To overcome the problem of closed markets, the fisherwomen delivered fish to the known customers at home. Following the CovidSoPs, they will clean and wash the fish at home, pack them in boxes and deliver them to the customer's doors. One of the respondents shared her experience of selling the fish during the lockdown; *I will clean the fish in the early morning and deliver it to the customers the same day. I had to walk a long distance as transport was not available. I did not make money then, and they paid it later. But I was in touch with my customers through p[h]one and received the order on phone only.*<sup>vii</sup> The fisherwomen from the vicinity of Dal lake came up with a women's Self-Help Group, where they pooled the resources together and helped each other. Through this group,



these women started making the fish pickles during the lockdown, and through social media, they were able to find online customers. Although there were reports of an increase in domestic violence that the fisherwomen faced at home during the lockdown, it was through the intervention of the Self-Help Group that many such incidents could be stopped and issues were resolved in the family. The initiative of the Self-Help group was joined by men also, who helped the women in packing as well as delivering the final products to customers. The Self-Help Group also asked for the space from the local mosque, where educated youth in the community will teach the school going children during the times of lockdown. As one of the founding members of the Self-Help Group said, *lockdown took a toll on many things. We lost our earnings and livelihood. But we do not want to compromise on the education of children. They cannot attend the online classes, but our educated youth can contribute and teach them.*<sup>viii</sup> Through the individual and collective efforts of the fisherwomen, they could overcome the financial and social problems they faced during the lockdown.

### CONCLUSION

The lockdown amidst Covid-19 impacted the livelihood of people working in the informal sector of the economy in India. The fishing community in Kashmir, which belong to the marginalized section of Hanji community, had a difficult time during this lockdown. Their livelihood was hampered, but there was also an impact on their social and family life. The lockdown had an indirect effect on the education of their children. They were not able to pay back the instalments against their loans. Due to a lack of facilities to preserve fish, they could not store the fish for a long time and had to waste the fish, which remained unsold. But during these difficult times, the fisherwomen exhibited their resilience by finding alternative ways of selling their fish. In this case, using technology, phones, could rescue them to a more significant extent. Home delivery of clean fish to the customers was one of the steps in this direction. The Self-Help Group formation provided a space for the fisherwomen to discuss their problems and possible solutions. Self-Help Group helped the families in dire need of basic amenities and provided an alternative to selling the fish pickles. It also intervened in the cases of domestic violence and alternative schooling of children during the lockdown.

The ongoing violent conflict in Kashmir and the Covid -19 have proved an obstacle both for gender-sensitive research, policy and practice as far as vulnerable groups like fisherwomen are concerned. Constant state surveillance proved fatal for the interaction between the researchers and the participants, which affected the production of data and new knowledge as far as gender-responsive research is concerned. The lockdown amidst Covid-19 has proved one more obstacle for searchers to look at the livelihood issues of the vulnerable groups. Additionally, the lack of communication between academics in universities, activists from local organisations and policy-making state institutions has added more problems. Moreover, the prism of 'national security rather than gender-responsive thinking dominates the policymakers from the state institutions. The policy interventions tend to follow the top-down approach without taking the insights from the field practitioners into consideration.

Endnotes:

- <sup>i</sup> Interview with the Fisherwoman on the foreshore road, Dal lake, Srinagar on 4/10/2021
- <sup>ii</sup> Interview with the Fisherwoman at her house at Dalgate, Srinagar 21/10/2021
- <sup>iii</sup> Interview with the daughter of Fisherwoman at her house at Dalgate, Srinagar 21/10/2021
- <sup>iv</sup> Interview with the Fisherwoman at the Amira Kadal Bride, Srinagar on 9/10/2021
- <sup>v</sup> Interview with the Fisherwoman at her house near the banks of Dal lake, Srinagar on 18/11/2021
- <sup>vi</sup> Interview with the Fisherwoman on the foreshore road, Dal lake, Srinagar on 4/10/2021
- <sup>vii</sup> Interview with the Fisherwoman in the Houseboat in Jhelum near AddullahBridge, Srinagar on 6/10/2021
- <sup>viii</sup> Interview with the founder of Self-Help Group of Fisherwomen on the foreshore road, Dal lake, Srinagar on 12/10/2021`

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