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## **The 'Stigma' of Paid Work: Capital, State, Patriarchy and Women Fish Workers in South India**

By P. Aswathy<sup>1</sup> and K. Kalpana<sup>2</sup>

### **Abstract**

This paper explores the changing dynamics of women's labor in a Muslim fishing village in the South Indian state of Kerala in the back drop of two global processes viz., state-initiated capitalist modernization of the fisheries sector and state-sponsored livelihood promotion programs. It traces the shifting contexts in which Muslim fisherwomen, alternately, engaged in and disengaged from, paid work outside the household and shows how women experienced different kinds of paid work, as self-employed fish vendors and wage earners of employment guarantee schemes. Changes in women's labor force participation were mediated by the social institutions of family and religion, community patriarchies and ideologies of female domesticity and the state's endeavors to constitute women as entrepreneurial actors who take responsibility for the economic well-being of their households. The paper maps women's struggles to secure and retain paid work in the face of a resurgent domestic feminine ideal and its zealous defenders in their village.

*Keywords:* paid work, fisheries, gender, patriarchy

### **Introduction**

Traditional fisher communities in many parts of the world have faced the onslaught of mechanization and capitalist modernization over the past several decades. National governments have aggressively pursued export-oriented fisheries policies that have resulted in over-fishing and eroded marine ecologies to the detriment of small-scale and artisanal fisher communities (Binkley 2005; Fulgencio 2009; Kurien 1998, 2007). This paper outlines the changing dynamics of artisanal fisherwomen's labor in a Muslim-dominated coastal village in the South Indian state of Kerala in the back drop of two macro processes viz., state-initiated mechanization and capitalist modernization of the fisheries sector and state-sponsored employment and livelihood generation programs, with many of the latter targeting women. The objective of this paper is to explore and analyze the complex and contradictory forms that women's paid work takes, when it is promoted by state developmental initiatives and performed in a local setting marked by social conservatism and fragile and insecure livelihoods. As feminist scholarship demonstrates, local patriarchies and region-specific cultural ideologies mediate the effects of paid work on women's life-worlds in particular, situated contexts (Kabeer 2000, 2001; Mills 2003; Ong 2010).

The paper provides an overview of changes in the traditional livelihoods of fishermen and women in the study village in response to capitalist modernization of the sector. We trace the

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shifting contexts that induced Muslim fisherwomen in the study village to engage in and disengage from paid work outside the household. What forms did women's work as fish vendors take in the past (i.e., prior to mechanization and state livelihood interventions) and how has it changed now? How do women respond to state-promoted entrepreneurialism and wage employment and how does this experience differ from their traditional occupation of fish vending? How do men respond to women's economic activities and agency? How effective are state programs in supporting women's traditional livelihoods (fish vending) in a rapidly changing and competitive business environment?

Section 1 of the paper briefly outlines the gender division of labor in fisheries and the impacts that capitalist modernization of the sector has had on small-scale and artisanal fishers in the state of Kerala. Section 2 provides an overview of state government programs promoting self-employment and women's entrepreneurship as well as wage employment schemes of the central government. Section 3 introduces the field site and outlines in detail the research methodology that has informed the study. Section 4 discusses and analyses the key findings of the study. The Conclusion (Section 5) highlights the key findings of the study.

### **Capitalist development, mechanization and women's work in Kerala Fisheries**

Marine fisheries statistics show that only 5% of fisher folk in Kerala engage in work outside the fisheries sector and the majority rely on fishing and allied activities for their daily bread (GOK 2009). Traditionally the gender division of labor in the community corresponds to the demarcation of sea and land as the sites of men's work and women's work respectively. Women are forbidden from venturing into the sea and only undertake those activities that precede and succeed fishing in the sea. Consequently, women constitute 67% of the total workforce in fishing-allied activities that include net-making, salting, peeling, drying and vending fish (CMFRI 2012). The fishing community in Kerala comprises three religious communities - Hindu, Muslim and Christian of the Latin Catholic (LC) denomination. By and large, women of the Muslim community, unlike their Hindu and LC counterparts, do not engage in fish vending and are confined to domestic chores or cottage industries (Dietrich and Nayak 2002). However, there are observed differences in women's livelihood patterns within the same religion or caste. For instance, women of a higher economic status may not work as vendors even if their husbands are fishermen. Although women's work in market spaces is generally associated with stigma, the stigma reduces with ageing and life-cycle changes. Thus women's workforce participation involves a complicated interplay between economic necessity and considerations of social status in Kerala society (Hapke 2001; Hapke and Ayyankeri 2004).

Scholars concur that planned development and capitalist modernization of the fisheries sector in Kerala have eroded the livelihoods of traditional artisanal fishing communities (Kurien 1995, 1998; Kumar 1999). The Indo-Norwegian project of the 1950s, which introduced technological innovations in order to address 'low productivity' in Indian fisheries, embraced an export-oriented approach from the 1960s. Financed by the project, mechanized trawler boats were introduced in the coastal waters to feed a growing global market for prawn (Hapke 2001). Consequently, over-fishing caused stagnation and over-exploitation of marine resources from the late 1970s and 1980s. The Department of Fisheries of Kerala documents a loss of marine diversity and an absolute decline in total catch from the 1990s, adversely affecting the livelihoods of small-scale and traditional fishers (GOK 2007).

Capitalist modernization processes paved the way for ice plants and storing technologies, centralized boat landing sites and large-scale marketing of fish. Some of these developments have had adverse implications for women's work. Formerly, women vendors obtained fish from their male relatives or community men. Subsequently, over-exploitation of the sea created unemployment for men of their communities. When coupled with the commercialization of marketing networks, women lost intra-household, male kin-based access to fish and had to procure fish (at high prices) from elsewhere. Despite modernization of the fishing sector, women carried out their work in a subsistence mode and remained over-represented in the under-class of petty vendors (Hapke and Ayyankaril 2004).

This study, aiming to understand the changes in women's work in a fishing village in Kerala reeling under the impacts of capitalist modernization of the sector, is informed and inspired by feminist standpoint theories that do away with the 'God trick' (Haraway 1988) of speaking authoritatively about the world from no particular location or human perspective and emphasize instead the partial, local and historically specific ways in which we know the world. As these theories argue, certain social positions (of subaltern and oppressed communities) enable us to arrive at better understandings of the world. In this study, we foreground the standpoints of the Muslim fisherwomen of income-poor and working class households that are an 'achieved rather than obvious and mediated rather than immediate understanding' (Hartsock 1985: 132) of their social universe, and not the spontaneous consciousness of a particular group of social actors. The theoretical assumption that framed this research was that the resources available to the Muslim fisherwomen in their particular social location (in physical spaces and systems of social relations) shaped their standpoints and their understandings of social processes and structures (Hartsock 1985). This study is grounded in women's lives, activities, experiences and labor so that we may position women as the subjects of knowledge about themselves, their social worlds and social relations more broadly, as feminist standpoint theories seek to do (Harding 2004).

### **State developmentalism and women: Livelihood and employment generation**

Since the early 1990s when the Indian state embraced neo-liberal economic reforms following the adoption of Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs), there has been growing emphasis on income generation for women living in poverty so that they may contribute better to the well-being of their families and communities without making demands on the straitened economic resources of an emergent capitalist state in India (Vasavi and Kingfisher 2003). Of much significance in this context are microfinance initiatives that promote the loan-financed self-employment route out of poverty (Kalpana 2017). In this regard, the two principal economic empowerment and livelihood programs implemented by the state government of Kerala are *Kudumbashree* and *Theeramythri*. Launched in 1998 with the twin objectives of poverty eradication and women's empowerment, Kudumbashree targets women across the state of Kerala and draws heavily from the global microfinance/credit paradigm that promotes women's credit access and income earning (Devika and Thampi 2007).

Kudumbashree is operationalized through grassroots women's collectives that work in tandem with the elected local self-governments in Kerala. Kudumbashree organizes women into neighborhood-based Self Help Groups (SHGs) of approximately 20 women each who save money, lend their savings to group members and obtain loans from public sector banks to augment their groups' financial corpus. By March 2017, Kudumbashree had covered more than 50% of the households of Kerala and mobilized a total membership of 4.3 million women (Kudumbashree

n.d). The project Theeramythri, which was launched in 2010, is focused on the coastal villages of Kerala and encourages fisherwomen to engage in ‘gainful self-employment for their economic and social emancipation’ both in fishing-related and alternative, non-fishing livelihoods. While the project has its roots in the SHG phenomenon, it follows a distinct pattern involving the selection and training of groups of fisherwomen, provision of financial assistance for women’s micro-enterprises and monitoring of economic activities (Theeramythri n.d.).

The women of Kerala’s fishing communities have also taken advantage of wage employment generation projects implemented by the central government. A significant program in this regard is the *Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MNREGS)*, which is implemented across India. Launched countrywide in 2006, the MNREGS guarantees 100 days of wage employment in a financial year to a rural household whose adult members volunteer to do unskilled manual work in afforestation, land development, water conservation, road laying, deepening irrigation channels and so on (GOI n.d). All work through the MNREGS involves physical labor and is carried on outside home/ familial spaces. While the program includes both men and women, 90% of the registered workforce of the MNREGS in Kerala consists of women (TISS 2011).

### **Field setting and research methods**

The immersive fieldwork for this study<sup>3</sup> was carried out over a period of six months (April-September 2016) in the coastal village of Vettoor *Panchayat*,<sup>4</sup> a Muslim dominated village in the Southern district of Thiruvananthapuram (also known as Trivandrum) in Kerala. The principal criteria that informed the choice of village for this study included (a) the prevalence of small-scale or artisanal fishing (b) engagement of Muslim women in fish vending and (c) operation of the state livelihood program, Theeramythri. During the first round of visits to the village, the researcher met with elected members of the village panchayat, panchayat-level officials of the state fisheries department and program coordinators of Kudumbashree. These initial meetings helped source available data on fishing livelihoods, MNREGS workers and women’s SHGs in the village.

The coastal village of Vettoor has a total of 990 families and a population of 3713. In the village, 61 women’s Self Help Groups of the Kudumbashree program were functional. A total of 1515 workers (men and women) were registered in the roll list of the MNREGS. In the absence of any data on women fish vendors in the village, the researcher sought the assistance of an elected member of the panchayat, a fish vendor herself, to identify vending women in the village. One introduction led to another and, after cross verifying that no vendor was left unidentified, a total of 30 women were found to be active vendors during the period of this study. One of the paper authors is a native speaker of the local language (Malayalam) and a trained social worker with extensive experience of work among fisher communities during her graduate study period. This experience helped build rapport and establish relationships of trust with women fish vendors in the village.

As part of the first round of visits to identify women vendors, socio-demographic data was collected on the age and marital status of the women, the occupations of earning members of their households and whether (or not) they participated in state livelihood and employment generation programs. Subsequently, in-depth and semi-structured interviews were conducted with all 30 vending women in order to trace their work-centered life histories. The women were interviewed

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<sup>3</sup> The fieldwork was undertaken as part of the doctoral research of one of the paper authors.

<sup>4</sup> A village panchayat is the lowest unit of a three-tiered structure of elected local self-government in India.

in their homes or the Theeramythri shops, with the women choosing their preferred place. Each interview typically extended over two to three sessions on different days. At the start of each session, the researcher prepared and shared a brief summary of the respondent's narrative from the previous session and invited her to alter, add or otherwise modify what she had shared earlier. In doing this, the researcher sought, as far as possible, to enable the respondent to reflect on the trajectories of her work life and the particular decisions and actions she had (or not) been able to take.

Focus Group Discussions consisting of three to four respondents were also held. These groups were constituted keeping in mind the differences of age and life cycle position of the women respondents. Separate discussions were held with younger, married, and older, widowed women, with women's participation (or not) in state livelihood programs being an additional axis of differentiation. These discussions moderated by the researcher were open-ended in nature and sought the women's views on particular themes that had emerged during the individual interviews and merited greater discussion either because these were recurring narratives or the respondents had differed from one another in the views they expressed. These discussions in which women both affirmed and contradicted each other's perspectives enhanced our understanding and sharpened our analysis of how women's varied life-cycle position, household circumstances and participation in state livelihood programs had influenced their differing standpoints and their work-lives as fish vendors.

Yet another method of study was non-participant observation of the women's everyday experience of buying and selling fish by accompanying them on visits to fish markets outside the village and the seashore auctions in the village. A total of 13 men in the community were also interviewed for the study. The men were selected on the basis of their availability in the village during the researchers' visits and their willingness to interact with the researcher. None of the men belonged to the households of the vending women.<sup>5</sup> Of the 13 interviewed, 4 were boat-owning fishermen, 2 fishermen on others' boats, 2 were fish vendors and 5 employed in non-fishing jobs in the informal sector such as carpentry, masonry and auto-driving. Apart from the boat owners and vendors (six in all) who were relatively better-off, the other men belonged to income-poor households that were similar in economic status to the households of the 30 women vendors in the village. Of the 13 men, 3 were between 25 and 40 years of age, 6 between 41 and 60 years and 4 were more than 60 years old. These interviews were open-ended in nature and elicited the views of the men on the shifting livelihood profiles of men and women since the onset of mechanization and what they felt were the implications of these changes for gender relations in the village.

As discussed here, the study primarily employed qualitative methods of data collection – oral histories, semi-structured, in-depth individual interviews, participant and non-participant observation, focus group discussions and case studies. While simple statistical tools (such as percentages and averages) were used to quantify the socio-demographic data in order to reveal underlying patterns, the qualitative data was analyzed and interpreted by inviting women's reflections on their own and others' experiences in the individual interviews and focus group discussions (as discussed). When analyzing the interviews and conversations with men and women in the village, our lens was informed by discourse analysis (Montell 1999), which assumes that talk is not neutral but always evaluative and performative. As Montell elaborates, the interview data are not examined only to uncover what they reveal about respondents' beliefs and activities. The analysis is focused on what people's talk reveals about the larger cultural discourse and the

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<sup>5</sup> This was by accident and not by design. The intention was neither to consciously seek out nor to avoid interviews with male members of the vending women's households.

ways it is possible to speak in that culture. Our focus on the “meanings, narratives, explanations, accounts and anecdotes” (Longhurst 1996 in Montell 1999: 64) in the transcripts of the interviews and group discussions with men and women respondents was particularly useful in this study which revolved around local discourses and notions of shame, stigma and social disgrace.

## Findings and Discussions

The first part of this discussion elaborates on the effects of mechanization on the changing livelihoods of fishermen and women in Vettoor during the last three decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. We discuss next the impacts of state livelihood programs on women’s work post-2000, the contrasting social profiles of women who took to vending in this period as compared to the more longstanding vendors and the fish procurement and vending strategies of both groups of women vendors. We discuss the changes wrought by the MNREGS in the employment scenario of the village since 2006 and its role in intensifying women’s engagement in public spheres of work. Finally, we discuss men’s attitude to women’s increasing involvement in income-earning work outside the household and the negotiations with male kin that enabled women to work in public spaces.

### *Mechanization, Gulf migration and women’s withdrawal from vending*

The first motorized boats in Vettoor were introduced in 1987. Although motorization started relatively late in Vettoor, the increasing use of mechanized trawler boats elsewhere had depleted marine resources and diminished the fish catch from the 1970s. The high capital investment required for motorized fishing and the declining catch led to a significant drop in the scale of fishing in Vettoor. The primary response to this livelihood crisis was the Gulf-bound migration of men from the village in the 1980s. Since fishing did not seem a viable livelihood, the young men of the village aspired instead to find jobs in the Middle-Eastern countries. From the mid-2000s, some of those who had remained fishermen also began to move from work in the sea to work in the land as auto drivers, daily wageworkers in the informal sector or fish vendors.

The two interlinked processes of reduced scale of fishing and male migration had significant repercussions for the livelihoods of women in the village. During the 1970s and 1980s, women were engaged in drying, processing and selling fish brought to the seashore by their men. Women had access to and ownership of a storage space/room (called *Koodu*) in the seashore. A respondent described it thus:

*‘During those days we used to go to the seashore to dry fish with our grandmother. Fish was available in plenty. It was difficult to find space to dry fish and we had to walk some distance to find it. There were many other women too... We had a koodu on the seashore. After drying, the fish was stored in the koodu. But now it is exclusively used by our men to keep their nets and fishing equipment’ (Fatima,<sup>6</sup> 42 years).*

This testimony attests to women’s active involvement in the community’s traditional livelihood in the pre-mechanization period – a trend that was decisively reversed since the late 1980s. Stories of women’s loss of the *koodu* that appeared often in their testimonies, symbolized withdrawal from their livelihood activity. As explained in Section 1, women lost direct (kin-based)

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<sup>6</sup> All respondents’ names have been changed in the paper.

access to fish in the Kerala coast after the 1970s due to mechanization and related changes in marketing networks. While Latin Catholic fisherwomen in many coastal communities continued to vend fish by traveling to fish markets outside the village and buying fish from non-kin men, the more rigid social norms and practices of gender segregation among Muslims in Kerala (as compared to other communities) restricted Muslim women's mobility and inhibited social or business interaction with men outside their close kin networks.

Women's disappearance from the seashore in Vettoor village was also a by-product of the Gulf migration of men, the related wealth accumulation and upward class mobility of the community and the rising influence of middle class values and gender ideologies that regulate and constrain women's work choices. During the late 1980s and 1990s, women withdrew from paid work outside the home and in particular, work in public spaces like vending. In the words of a respondent,

*'In the past, it was women who dominated fish vending. During my mother's time, their number had reduced...some of the older vendors died. But the actual reduction was a result of Gulf migration. After my uncle started working in the Gulf the living conditions became better and my grandmother stopped vending...'*  
(Rehana, 38 years).

#### *Re-entry of women in fish vending: 'old' and 'new' vendors*

The state and central government-sponsored livelihood and employment generation programs in the post-2000 years induced a shift in women's involvement in paid work in the village. Kudumbashree was initiated in Vettoor in 2003 and women's participation in the SHGs gradually increased over a few years. Notably, some SHG women chose fish vending as their livelihood activity under the aegis of Kudumbashree. Theeramythri further boosted women's participation in fish vending and processing as well as alternative livelihood activities when it was introduced in 2010 in Vettoor. As part of Theeramythri, a five-day entrepreneurial skill-training program helped women choose livelihood activities that would be carried out through Economic Activity Groups (EAGs) of four women each in small shops located in rented premises. Of the five Theeramythri EAGs in Vettoor village, three were registered as fish drying, processing and vending units. These activities carried out with the support of Kudumbashree and Theeramythri made a difference to women's self-perception as 'business women'. The training classes were a new experience for many women and they began to conceive of themselves as entrepreneurial subjects. In the words of two respondents,

*'It is through the SHG classes that we got the courage to do business. We began to think of the importance of our own money and ways of making money'*  
(Nabeesa, 46 years).

*'It is after Kudumbashree and the SHGs that younger women entered vending. Otherwise Muslim women do not sell fish'* (Shabana, 60 years).

As stated earlier, 30 women were found to be active in fish vending during the period of the field study.<sup>7</sup> Twenty of the 30 women were associated with Kudumbashree and/or Theeramythri groups

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<sup>7</sup> Many more women had taken to fish vending after the launch of state livelihood programs in the village. Some of them had ceased vending due to low returns.



and took to vending after the advent of these programs in the village. The other ten vendors had no association with Kudumbashree or Theeramythri and were selling fish even during the pre-2000 period when women in the community had withdrawn from the seashore and fish vending. In their case, poverty and dire economic need had forced them to remain fish vendors. For the purpose of shorthand and convenience, we classify the two groups of vendors as SHG vendors and non-SHG vendors. Tables 1 and 2 show the age-wise distribution and formal education status of the SHG and non-SHG vending women respectively.

**Table 1: Age profile of vending women**

| Age (years) | Number of SHG vendors | Number of non-SHG vendors |
|-------------|-----------------------|---------------------------|
| 20 – 40     | 4                     | 0                         |
| 41 – 60     | 14                    | 7                         |
| 60 +        | 2                     | 3                         |
| Total       | 20                    | 10                        |

**Table 2: Education status of vending women**

| Education            | Number of SHG vendors | Number of non-SHG vendors |
|----------------------|-----------------------|---------------------------|
| No education         | 3                     | 7                         |
| Primary school (1-4) | 3                     | 3                         |
| Middle school (5-7)  | 4                     | 0                         |
| High school (8-10)   | 10                    | 0                         |
| Total                | 20                    | 10                        |

As Table 1 shows, the non-SHG vending women were older than the SHG vendors. 20% of the SHG vendors were in the age group of 20-40 years, whereas none of the non-SHG women belonged to this age group. 30% of the non-SHG vendors were older than 60 years as compared to 10% of the SHG vendors. The presence of younger women among the SHG vendors indicates that livelihood programs have attenuated the stigma that inhibits younger women from taking up fish vending. The differences in education between two groups appear more striking. As Table 2 shows, 70% of the non-SHG vendors were non-literate as compared to 15% of SHG vendors. While none of the non-SHG women had middle or high school education, 20% of the SHG vendors had middle school and 50% had high school education.

Table 3 and Table 4 present data on the marital status of the women and their principal breadwinner status with respect to their households.

**Table 3: Marital status of vending women**

| Marital status     | Number of SHG vendors | Number of non-SHG vendors |
|--------------------|-----------------------|---------------------------|
| Married            | 12                    | 3                         |
| Widowed/ Separated | 8                     | 7                         |
| Total              | 20                    | 10                        |

**Table 4: Breadwinner status of vending women**

| Primary breadwinner | Number of SHG vendors | Number of non-SHG vendors |
|---------------------|-----------------------|---------------------------|
| Yes                 | 5                     | 7                         |
| No                  | 15                    | 3                         |
| Total               | 20                    | 10                        |

Table 3 shows that widowed or separated women<sup>8</sup> were 70% of non-SHG vendors as compared to 40% of the SHG vendors. As might be expected, 70% of the non-SHG vendors were primary breadwinners of their respective families. In contrast, only 25% of the SHG women were found to be primary breadwinners. It appears that the women drawn to vending through the encouragement of state livelihood programs were not driven by dire economic need to be the primary earners of their families, except in a minority of cases. Their higher levels of education also suggest that state entrepreneurial programs have attracted women who may have not otherwise considered fish vending as an acceptable livelihood activity given the withdrawal of women (apart from the very poor) in Vettoor village from vending since the 1990s. The differences of age, education, gendered life cycle and marital status as well as the different set of circumstances (pre-SHGs and post-SHGs) in which the two groups of women took to vending shaped the fish procurement and vending practices of the two groups in distinctive ways, as discussed in the following sections.

#### *Procuring fish: concealment and evasion*

In order to buy the fish, the vendors had to bid for it in auctions that took place in the seashore in Vettoor village. The fish procurement practices of SHG and non-SHG vendors and their participation in the seashore auction present an interesting contrast. Of the 10 non-SHG women, 8 took part in auctions and purchased fish directly from the Vettoor seashore. In contrast, 16 of the 20 SHG women neither bought fish from the seashore nor participated in the auction. They purchased fish from a neighboring village Anjuthengu, which was dominated by the Latin Catholic fisher community or, when unable to travel to this village, made arrangements to purchase fish from Vettoor through intermediaries. The procurement of fish from Anjuthengu village had contradictory implications for women's work and mobility. On the one hand the SHG vendors widened the boundaries of their workspace and traveled routinely outside their village. However, the women traveled for the explicit purpose of evading the gaze of the male members of their community and concealing evidence of their participation in the male-dominated auction space of the seashore.

When required, the SHG vending women also assigned older women in their SHG to purchase fish from the Vettoor seashore. Since these arrangements sometimes led to disagreements and quarrels on the quality, quantity and pricing of fish procured by the third party, the SHG women's concealment strategies and absence from the auction place were not costless or conflict-free. Two respondents put it thus:

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<sup>8</sup> Of the total 15 (8 SHG and 7 non-SHG), only 2 women were separated and 13 were widowed. Hence widowed and separated women are presented as one category in the Table. None of the vendors were single or legally divorced.

*'I go to Anjuthengu and take part in the auction and buy fish. But in the Vettoor seashore, I make someone purchase fish for me and I stand in a shed. I don't want to be seen in the seashore with fish. It will shame the male elders in my family.'* (Noorjahan, 50 years).

*'In Anjuthengu village things are not like they are here (Vettoor). Here they pass comments or make fun of us if we enter the seashore. But there, men and women are equals in the seashore. We have conflicts with the women (of Anjuthengu) during the auction. But that is all part of the game!'* (Fatima, 42 years).

The SHG women chose to purchase fish from Anjuthengu due to their relative anonymity in the Latin Catholic (LC) community. As outsiders or non-community members, the Muslim women from Vettoor could not buy fish on credit and had to pay ready cash for the purchase. Since the LC fishermen preferred ready cash, there was a high chance that the 'outsider' women would win the auction, leading to conflicts with the LC women fish vendors who lost out on the fish. Sometimes the women from Vettoor were forced to raise the price in order to win the auction. In this case as well, the SHG women's concealment strategies were not always cost-effective for them.

#### *Modes, sites and commercial prospects of vending*

To understand the vending practices of SHG and non-SHG women vendors, we locate the vending sites on a spectrum that ranges from the most stigmatized or least respectable to the most acceptable physical space for vending fish. Seen in this manner, the vending sites are fish markets, roadside sales, door-to-door delivery of fish and Theeramythri shop vending. The fish market was the most open and unprotected public space that may or may not be located inside a building. The fish markets were situated outside the village and close to or in a township or city. The market environment was usually noisy, crowded and lacking in infrastructure such as drinking water and toilets. Some women preferred roadside vending carried out within their own village. This involved squatting in a street corner that was recognized as a vendor's habitual space. The women who engaged in door-to-door fish sales also worked in their own village. Women in the Theeramythri shops sold fish in an enclosed space – a small rented building. Table 5 provides a break-up of the sites of vending of the SHG and non-SHG vending women.

**Table 5: Vending sites of SHG and non-SHG women**

| Sites of vending   | Number of SHG vendors | Number of Non-SHG vendors |
|--------------------|-----------------------|---------------------------|
| Fish market        | 0                     | 6                         |
| Roadside sales     | 0                     | 2                         |
| Door-to-door sales | 18                    | 2                         |
| Theeramythri shop  | 2                     | 0                         |
| Total              | 20                    | 10                        |

Table 5 shows that the majority (80%) of the non-SHG vending women engaged in market and roadside vending – both located on the more 'public' end of the vending spectrum. In contrast,

none of the SHG vendors worked out of the fish markets or the roadside. 90% of the SHG vendors engaged in door-to-door vending and sold their fish in nearby homes in Vettoor. It was their complete avoidance of the crowded and disreputable market places that made possible their involvement in vending.

Of the 20 SHG vendors, the majority (18) also worked in the MNREGS work sites in which they earned a daily wage of Indian Rupees (INR) 245. Since they had to report for work at 9.30AM, they spent about three hours a day in vending work in the early hours of the morning. The SHG vendors' fish purchase was on average INR 2500 per day and the daily earning was about INR 150. Among the non-SHG vendors, only 3 of 10 women worked at the MNREGS sites. Their daily procurement of fish amounted to an average of INR 3750 and their income was about INR 450 per day. Due to the longer hours and rigors of work at the fish markets, the non-SHG vending women were unable to take part in Kudumbashree or the MNREGS.

The women vendors of Vettoor, both SHG and non-SHG vendors alike, struggled to survive and eke out a sustainable livelihood in the highly competitive fish business. A sufficient quantity of fish was simply not available at the Vettoor seashore given the declining fish catch and boat landings at the shore. Even if the catch were high on a particular occasion, the price of fish did not fall. Vans and other vehicles equipped with high-cost freezers took away the fish to distant markets. Many women vendors relied on informal moneylenders to source the capital required to buy fish, leading to a debt crisis. Of 30 vendors, 25 were repaying debt during the period of this study. The average amount of outstanding debt of the women was INR 56900, ranging from INR 2000 to INR 300,000. Women's responsibility for household consumption related spending and the marriage of children especially daughters also contributed to their heavy debt burden.

#### *MNREGS, women workers and 'men's' work*

The MNREGS was very influential in bringing women into public spheres of work in Vettoor. When the scheme was introduced in 2006, not many women in the village welcomed it. A respondent said,

*'In the early days, it was women of Kudumbashree SHGs who came forward to work in the MNREGS. Both men and the women who stayed at home made fun of us. But the women who ridiculed us started working in the MNREGS after 2-3 years and apologized to us. If similar incidents occur now, we will react collectively. In the past this was not the case. We were less in number and not so strong' (Fatima, 42 years).*

This testimony alludes to the strength and voice that women gained through the experience of collective work in the MNREGS. The SHG vendors who also worked in the MNREGS experienced the two types of work quite differently. The fish business was individualized and competition among women vendors was inevitable. The MNREGS, a wage employment program, offered the women a constant and comparatively higher monetary return, besides creating spaces for collective work and friendship, untainted by business rivalries that pit self-employed workers against each other. The MNREGS brought women into work such as weeding, digging, cleaning and clearing the land that was customarily regarded as men's work. Since the state was the employer in the MNREGS, the respectability and higher status of 'government work' made it possible for women to perform this work. In the last five years, women workers of the MNREGS in Vettoor village (including some of the SHG vending women) have taken to performing manual

work in the private properties of economically well-off households in the village. The experience and confidence that women gained when performing ‘men’s work’ in the MNREGS worksites motivated them to take up wage work in the private sector as well. Those who hired the women benefited from the reduced cost of labor since the market rates for a male and female worker for five hours of manual work were INR 750 and INR 450 respectively.

*Men’s attitude toward women’s work and household negotiations*

In their narratives, the women repeatedly testified to the expansion of their social universe and described enjoying their newfound financial independence. In the words of a respondent,

*‘Before Kudumbashree I never went outside my house... Two years after joining Kudumbashree I became the President of an SHG and I slowly lost my timidity. Now I even go for manual work in a private property and I’m often hired for such work.’ (Fatima 42 years).*

If state initiatives such as Kudumbashree, Theeramythri and the MNREGS rendered visible women’s presence and work in public spaces, they also provoked the anger and displeasure of men in the community. Some fishermen trivialized women’s economic contribution and refused outright to recognize women’s fish vending as important, income-generating work. One of the fishermen initially contacted when surveying the village for this study emphatically denied that there was any woman vendor in the village. Commenting on women’s participation in income-generating opportunities, two male respondents said,

*‘All this work has made women arrogant and disobedient. Muslim women are not supposed to expose themselves to other men. But now all women roam outside. There is no one to take care of our children’ (Abdul, 49 years).*

*‘We can understand if women from poor families go out to work. But why should women, whose husbands and sons are earning in the Gulf, go to work?’ (Rafeek, 62 years).*

The shrinking livelihood opportunities for men in Vettoor also fuelled their anxieties and anger. As discussed earlier, many fishermen had moved from fishing to working in the land following the declining fish catch and the rising costs of fishing. Women’s entry into male domains of work on the land threatened men with the prospect of unemployment and diminished their public image as primary breadwinners. The men whose families benefited from the earnings of their wives and daughters also suffered from the general disapproval of the community. For instance, the husband of Fatima (quoted above) was forced to endure the taunts of his friends. In Fatima’s words,

*‘Sometimes my husband scolds me harshly... His friends make fun of him saying, “You are the one who works hard, but your wife earns more than you”. I feel bad and console him by pointing out that I don’t engage in any wrong activities. I tell him that I’m working only in the daytime.... The main reason for the immoral activities of Muslim women is that their lives are confined within the four walls of*

*the house. If they are brought to public space and allowed to work, they won't have time to think of wrong doing' (Fatima 42 years).*

In this case, Fatima reminded her husband that her work did not involve the 'dubious' activities (of sex work) that took place at night. By strategically invoking the patriarchal armament of 'morality' that controls and regulates women's work in public spaces, Fatima sought to legitimize and defend her paid work. In another instance, two women who jointly managed a fish vending business in a Theeramythri shop gave it up when their male kin objected to its location on the main road and the 'exposure' of the women to the gaze of passers-by. Other women who retained their micro-businesses always remained conscious of the social costs of being working women. In the words of Jumaina,

*'It is because of my fate that I sell fish. My relatives don't know that I'm a fish vendor. After some time, I will stop this business and go to Mecca'<sup>9</sup> (Jumaina, 63 years).*

Six months after the first interview, Jumaina was selling fish in the same place after the trip to Mecca. Her voice filled with regret, she said,

*Once you come back from Mecca you are not supposed to sit on the roadside or sell fish. You must follow a disciplined life. But I have debt to repay...' (Jumaina, 63 years).*

## **Conclusion**

This paper has examined the livelihood scenario of Vettoor village, its gender dynamics and changes therein since the mechanization of the fisheries sector and the inception of state-sponsored livelihood programs. The Muslim women of Vettoor withdrew from their traditional livelihood during the 1980s and the 1990s, driven partly by the spread of middle class ideologies of domesticity that promoted the seclusion of women within the household. The re-entry of women in fish vending has taken place in a specific historic moment in which women are viewed as economic agents by an emergent neo-liberal state in India. Women's participation in one state-sponsored project trained, groomed and equipped them to seize opportunities made available by the succeeding ones. The cumulative effects of these programs included the enhancement of women's capabilities, growing confidence in inhabiting public spaces and the unintended outcome of women seeking casual jobs in the private sector.

And yet, women's engagement in paid work in Vettoor remains a complex story. The women of Vettoor struggled to reconcile entrepreneurial discourses of the state with local patriarchies and worldviews that perpetuated the stigma of the 'market' woman and vending woman. Women's work as part of livelihood and employment schemes threatened men in the village with the prospect of unsettling the prevailing gender order. Having to contend with the community's displeasure at their heightened visibility as workers and earners in public spaces, women concealed evidence of their work, won the grudgingly-given permission of their husbands (to work) through fraught arguments and even relinquished an income-earning opportunity when

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<sup>9</sup> She refers to the Hajj pilgrimage to Mecca, the holiest city in Islam.

opposition was fierce. The case of Vettoor highlights the struggles of women to undertake paid work in the face of the domestic feminine ideal and its zealous defenders in their village.

This study also confirms that statist discourses valorizing women's entrepreneurship do not guarantee women's economic empowerment or their commercial success as micro-entrepreneurs. Kudumbashree and Theeramythri led women to the path of self-employment, but failed to provide the assistance necessary for the women to thrive in a male and big fisher-dominated market. Our study therefore raises the question of how women's small-scale and traditional livelihoods are to be made viable when the odds are stacked against the artisanal fisher community to which they belong? Nation-states pursuing neo-liberal economic policies encourage women in poverty to embrace risks and manage micro-businesses, even as globalized market networks and corporate players are allowed a free hand. The conflict of interest between the state's active promotion of 'free' markets and its efforts to offer entrepreneurship-based solutions to women of marginalized communities appears stark and irreconcilable.

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