

HOW EMPOWERING WOMEN GLEANERS IN SRI LANKA WILL BUILD STRONGER HOUSEHOLD ECONOMIES

By U.L.K. Perera, K.L.D. Nilanka, J.A.R.U. Jayakody, and R.A.R.M. Ranasinghe

Gleaning of mussels, clams, and oysters is important in terms of its contribution to animal protein intake and food security, and also as a means of livelihood and income generation for the rural poor. As those engaged in this traditional fishery in Sri Lanka are mainly women, gleaning is important as an activity that adds value to these women in the household economy as well as nationally. However, this small-scale fishery sector receives very little attention and therefore remains poorly developed. Providing women gleaners with the necessary financial and technical support will enhance their economic potential, improve their quality of life, and contribute to the expansion of the sector.



Women gleaners hard at work



Gleaning of clams, oysters and mussels is an isolated and silent fishery in Sri Lanka. Due to its non-popularity, hardly anyone's attention is being paid to this unique small-scale sector. However, as the majority engaged in this fishery are women, gleaning is a very important fishing activity than it would appear. Not only does it create job opportunities for women, it also contributes toward the equitable participation of women in fisheries.

Representation and recognition of fisherwomen in policy dialogues and implementation are not at a satisfactory level. Even though there are various strategies which have been implemented uplifting the living standard of fishers and the empowerment of women engaged in fishery-related livelihoods, women gleaners are, to all intents and purposes, forgotten and none of the strategies have focused specifically on them.

Numerically, more than 1 000 women earn their livelihood from this fishery on a full-time or part-time basis and a similar number of families are dependent on it. These women are most likely under-represented in national fisheries statistics as this fishery is considered as an informal production sector and is not usually accounted for in marine capture fisheries production. Data on subsistence fisheries, especially from gleaning, are not included in official fisheries statistics and its contribution in the national GDP is hidden.

Clams, oysters and mussels are widely distributed in the shallow waters along the northwest, north and east coasts of the island. Hence gleaning is carried out in extremely remote areas where life is very difficult and finding a means of livelihood is a challenge. It is observed that many families who depend on this fishery are satisfied only with the basic needs and the standard of living is low. Therefore, this artisanal

fishery is crucial for the survival of communities along the coast to some extent. According to the prevailing information, Puttalam situated along the northwest coast, Trincomalee and Batticaloa to the east, and Mullaitivu, Mannar, Jaffna and Kilinochchi in the north can be identified as the coastal districts where gleaning activities are generally taking place with the significant involvement of women. According to the national statistics, most of these districts have been identified as areas with monetary poverty.

Due to the availability of resources, this fishery is carried out near the shore in most areas. But the women in some areas such as Puttalam, Batticaloa and Trincomalee have to travel a certain distance to the respective grounds by boat in order to engage in this fishery. The grounds are located between 0.5 km to 25 km distance from the shore in those districts. For travelling purposes, they avail the services of fishing boats on payment basis as a group.

Among those engaged in this fishery, 34% are men and 66% are women. They live in fishing villages as nuclear families with the average household size being 3.7. In the Puttalam, Mannar, Trincomalee and Batticaloa districts, women are represented in higher numbers among the gleaners involved in collecting clams, oyster and mussels. In districts such as Jaffna, Mullaitivu and Kilinochchi, both men and women are involved in mussel gleaning, with men being more represented; nevertheless, the processing of mussels gleaned by the men is done by women. All the women who engage in this fishery are married and the majority of them are in the age group of 40 to 60 years.

Almost everyone who engages in this industry are Tamil-speaking Muslims as generally, Buddhist women have a strong aversion to killing or harming living beings based on their religious beliefs. Some 95% of the women involved in this fishery have only attended school up to primary level or not been schooled ever. About 68% of the women have been engaged in gleaning as their traditional fishing activity for as long as between 5 to 40 years, approximately 58% of women have experience from 15 to 30 years, and around 32% are new entrants.

Harvesting, processing and marketing of mussels

In mussel harvesting, the season of gleaning usually spans about eight months and often varies regionally; in general, it can be said that this duration varies between March and October. A specific peak production period can be identified for each area, which is limited to a period of three to four months.

The daily harvest of mussels is approximately 40 kilograms per woman. After processing the mussels, they attain an average volume of 4.15 kilograms. The volume of harvest and the species composition vary from region to region. These women work hard, about 15 days per month, spending about 8.5 hours per day in the harvesting of clams, oysters and mussels, with the rest of the days given to processing the harvest. They get a fairly good income commensurate with the effort.



Happy with her harvest

Clams, oysters and mussels are sold in various forms depending on the consumer demand or ease of processing or ease of preservation. With regard to mussels, these are available in fresh, dried, as well as boiled forms for sale in most of the districts where the gleaning is carried out by women. Mussel gleaning in the Kilinochchi district is not for commercial purposes; it is gleaned to use as a source of seafood for household subsistence. Gleaned mussels in districts like Jaffna are for both human consumption and as a feed for animals.



Using a sharp knife to remove fresh mussel meat

Fresh mussels are in high demand and sold in nearby areas at relatively high prices as they are regarded as being very tasty. However, it appears that some consumers are wary of eating too much mussel meat due to concerns over side-effects such as food poisoning, allergic reactions, etc.

Gleaned mussels in all the districts other than Jaffna and Kilinochchi are processed by removing the shell after having been boiled in large aluminium containers. The processing is done by the gleaning women themselves with the assistance of the rest of the members of their families. They add salt and turmeric powder when boiling the mussels. Boiled mussels are sold in the same form and some portion of it is sold after drying.



Processing the boiled mussels with the support of household members



(Left) Boiling mussels in an aluminium container; (Right) Boiled mussels ready for processing



Processed boiled mussels

Generally, the gleaners receive payments of about Rs. 920 per kilogram for fresh mussel without shell, Rs. 150 per kilogram for fresh mussel with shell, Rs. 3 440 per kilogram for dried mussel, and Rs. 840 per kilogram for boiled mussel. The dried mussel production in Mullaitive and Mannar is exported for the consumption of Sri Lankans in foreign countries, which brings in higher incomes for the gleaners. Accordingly, the average daily income of these women is around Rs. 3 625 (approximately USD 11). However although they are regarded as the high income earners of their households, these women gleaners are obviously missing out on real income as they are not aware of commercial markets, proper processing technology, and they lack funds to invest in the industry. In most cases, the spouses of these women engage in small-scale traditional fisheries using non-powered small coastal boats.

During the off-seasons, the women gleaners complement their livelihoods by engaging in weaving and selling coconut fronds for roofing and fencing, preparation of food for sale, collecting moss, etc. However none of these activities give them a better living than what they receive from gleaning mussels.

The income received from gleaning mussels is used for their daily expenses such as food, education requirements of children and medicine; and they do not forget to keep some amount securely in their possession for future needs and to be used in an emergency. Although they do not make formal savings through bank savings accounts, they appear to have good financial management. In cases of dire financial need, they borrow money from money lenders and pay them back in instalments.

There are some challenges faced by the women in this industry. Since this gleaning fishery is limited to a certain period of the year, they do not have an opportunity to obtain continuous income from it. Additionally, although the consumer demand and prices are better for fresh mussels, these women are more inclined to process boiled mussels as they do not have the appropriate technology to prepare mussels in fresh form. In order to remove the mussel meat in fresh form, they have to use a knife to pry open the shell using the strength of their hands, which is not only a relatively time-consuming task, it also tends to injure their hands. Another health risk is because these women have to spend a lot of time in the water during mussel gleaning, they suffer some health problems such as asthma, other respiratory diseases and skin problems.



A patented knife has been invented to help the gleaners to process the mussels safely

A further challenge is when women have to go some distance out to sea to collect mussels. They have to pay a considerable amount for the boat rent due to high fuel prices; therefore their profit is relatively less. As this industry is still at the traditional level, a competitive market with value-added products has not been developed yet; hence the women gleaners have to work long hours to harvest more mussels for better income. In certain areas such as Mullaitivu and Batticaloa, these women have to be more careful when engaged in this livelihood due to the crocodiles that live in the sea.

Strengthening gleaning communities

The introduction of new tools for processing mussels in fresh and other forms, as well as offering training on them, would enable women gleaners to save more time and earn a comparatively higher income after having produced a higher quality product that meets consumer demand. Appropriate technical tools have already been invented for mussel processing and there is a need to increase women gleaners' access to that technology by funding. The industry would benefit from gradually taking the necessary steps to enhance the mussel stock which is used for farming; attracting unemployed women to this industry; introducing value-added products; training women on processing higher-value products; as well as expanding the existing market by identifying new opportunities.

In terms of the framework, community-led initiatives, including the establishment of fisherwomen cooperative societies related to this fishery at village level, would result in ease of management and administration. Guiding fisherwomen towards financial management through a formal banking system would greatly benefit their household economy. Furthermore, the income of these women during the mussel off-season can be strengthened by introducing aquaculture-related livelihoods such as food fish farming, crab fattening, etc.

In summary, with the implementation of technical interventions, training, access to funding, and the establishment of women's cooperative societies, the economic status of the local communities can be strengthened and the standard of living of those who are involved in this industry, can be uplifted. 🌱



U.L.K. Perera, Statistician and the Head of the Statistics Unit of the Ministry of Fisheries, with more than seventeen years' experience in the fisheries statistics field including handling national fisheries statistics and IOTC and FAO data. A graduate from the University of Kelaniya with a Bachelor's degree with Statistics, she has participated in numerous national and international surveys, studies, feasibility studies, etc.; and is presently developing as a trainee researcher under the research-based policy formulation and researcher development programme of the Sri Lanka Institute of Development of Administration.



K.L.D. Nilanka, Graduated from University of Sri Jayawardanapura with a special degree in Social Statistics and a post-graduate diploma from the same university. He has more than seven years' experience in the Ministry of Fisheries as a Development Officer and has participated in several local and international surveys related to the fisheries industry, including "Resilience and Seizing Opportunities: Small-scale Fisheries and Aquaculture Businesses that Thrived during the COVID 19 Pandemic in South and South East Asia - Sri Lanka" conducted by INFOFISH.



J.A.R.U. Jayakody is a Statistical Officer at the Ministry of Fisheries and has been working for three years. A graduate from the University of Peradeniya with a Bachelor's degree specialised in Economics and a Master's degree from the University of Kelaniya in the same field, he has contributed to several local and international surveys related to the fisheries industry including "Resilience and Seizing Opportunities: Small-scale Fisheries and Aquaculture Businesses that Thrived during the COVID 19 Pandemic in South and South East Asia - Sri Lanka" conducted by INFOFISH; and a Food Loss and Waste Assessment conducted by FAO. At present, he is engaged in data analysis activities while studying further methodologies of fisheries data analysis.



R.A.R.M. Ranasinghe is a Statistical Officer at the Ministry of Fisheries, and has been working for two years. She graduated from the University of Peradeniya with a Bachelor's degree specialised in Economics and graduated from the same university with a Master's degree in Economics. Currently conducting data analysis while studying further methodologies of fisheries data analysis, she enjoys using her skills to contribute to decision-making in Sri Lankan fisheries.