



Living in the wind: Gendered perceptions of poverty and well-being in coastal fishing communities in Sri Lanka

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Living with uncertainty

- *We live in the wind. The life of a fishing family is hard and uncertain. If we go fishing in the sea, one day there is fish, one day there isn't. We have work for six months and none for the next six months. (Vansa, Malay widow and head of fishing household, ex-migrant worker in the Middle East, 48 years, Hambantota)*
- *Now I go five miles out because of security reasons. Earlier I went only a mile. Now there are less fish because fishers from both sides of the lagoon are fishing. The fish do not have enough time to breed. Probably 60 households fished five years ago, now 85. (Raja, male Tamil Hindu lagoon fisher/farmer, 37 years, Batticaloa)*



Living with uncertainty

- *During the warakang [windy off-season] here we have to migrate to other places – could be Chilaw [nearby] or Pulmoddai [on the East coast]. The warakang doesn't happen everywhere at the same time so we have to move to districts where it is not happening. My daughters help me in this business with cleaning and drying. We do not need specialized knowledge to do this. If you are married to a fisherman you get to know something about the fishing industry. (Chandralatha, female Sinhala Catholic dried fish trader, 35 years, Puttalam)*
- *With farming you earn a bit from day to day but there are big losses if crops fail. There are much less losses with fishing. (John, male Sinhala Catholic fish trader, 46 years, Puttalam)*



Research question

- Are the stakes different for women and men in sustaining fishing as a “way of life” and “way of making a living”?
 - Understanding poverty and well-being from the perspectives of women and men who confront change
 - Whose needs count in supporting well-being in fishing communities?

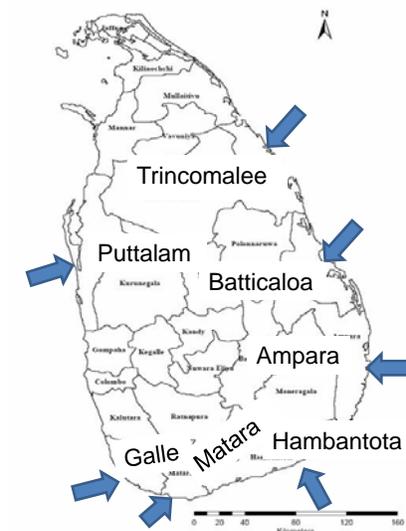


Conceptual framework

- Well-being approaches – theories of needs, capabilities (Sen), sustainable livelihoods framework, quantification of subjective well-being, social well-being
 - *Wellbeing is a state of being with others where human needs are met, where one can act meaningfully to pursue one's goals, and where one enjoys a satisfactory quality of life*. (U of Bath 2008) – material, relational, cognitive aspects
 - Grounded theory approach: how “well-being” is constructed in discourse and livelihood practices
 - Perceptions of poverty as an entry point to discussing well-being
- Gendered livelihood strategies mediated by ethnicity, religion, class in context of processes of change (Hapke and Ayyankeri 2004, Hapke 2001)
- The tension between “way of making a living” and “way of life” ; fishing associated with masculine identity (Power 2005)

Methods

- primary data from qualitative studies in 7 districts based on semi-structured interviews (inc. livelihood trajectories), focus groups and observation (2001-2006)
- literature review



Socio-historical context

- 79% of fishers belong to single caste (*karawe/karaiyar*) that cuts across Sinhala/Tamil ethnic groups and are predominantly of the Catholic religion (46%) (Munasinghe 1985)
- Exclusion of other groups into fishery through beach landing sites but opportunities and potential for negotiation exist (e.g. migrant fishers from W,S to E coast)
- Status of fishers lower than farmers – occupation associated with “taking of life”
 - 76-77% of members of fishing and farming communities believe it is incompatible with Buddhism; older more than younger respondents (Fernando 1985)
 - Majority of Buddhist fishers wishing to remain in fishing even if alternatives with equal or enhanced monetary returns were available (Fernando 1985); *neither economic or religious rationale is strong*
 - Majority in agricultural villagers willing to move into fisheries if returns from fishing were higher – *economic rationale stronger than religious belief* (Fernando 1985)
 - *higher income earning HHs* among Buddhists and Hindus *invest out of fisheries* (agriculture, other business) - not necessarily Catholics and Muslims
 - Women more likely to be influenced by religious prescription

Socio-historical context

- Gender division of labor – varies by coast, marine vs. lagoon, ethno-religious group. *“Women should not step into the water”; “If we go to the beach, the sea will take us away”.*
 - Men engaged in near and off-shore fishing/diving with gear; hold ritual knowledge for increasing catch (marine and lagoon –all coasts)
 - Women engaged in gleaning and near shore hand fishing (lagoons – E, W)
 - Women engaged in processing – HH level and micro/small/large enterprises based on coastal resources(marine E, S, W)
 - Pre-capture: mending nets – women (S), men (E, W)
 - Men engaged in wholesale, retail, long-distance trading with transport (all coasts); women in local retail trading on foot or bus (W and S)
 - Community social nets/reciprocity – sick crew members get share of catch; widows get share by right (“trimming the beard”) or pulling in boats/cleaning fish (all coasts); “fishing for curry” (lagoons)



Dynamics of poverty in fishing communities: Macro perspective

- Resource depletion and fishers
 - Fish production reached peak in 2002 and has declined
 - Number of fishers increased by 32% (1989-96) and 91% (96-2005)
 - Yield per fisher declined from 2.5 MT in 1990 to 1.5 MT in 2007
 - Fisher HH size has increased – now 4.8 (national average 4.2)
- 1980: fishing households had higher incomes on average than agricultural and urban working class HHs (Munasinghe 1985)
- 2003: this remains true (NARA 2006) ; however, households dependent primarily on fishing do not differ substantially in poverty levels compared with agricultural HHs; worse off than MSME- dependent HHs (Gunewardena et al. 2007)
- Income disparities among crews in four types of craft increased between 1980 and 2004 (except FRP and one-day inboard); disparity between lowest/highest 2.5 in 1980 to 6 in 2004

No robust data; different types of methodology

Gendered perceptions of poverty

- Poverty perceived as **lack** of income, employment , shelter and education by both
 - South: lack of infrastructure
 - East: conflict/violence and food insecurity
- Men stress lack of fishing assets
- Women emphasize food insecurity and lack of infrastructure and health services
- Women more likely to make a distinction between poor and very poor; men like to place larger % within category of “poor” and smaller % among “average”
- Causes of poverty
 - both: seasonality
 - men: middleman system/debt
 - women: alcoholism of men



Understanding the poverty and gender interface in fishing communities in SL

Poverty factors	Gender implications
Highly stratified: spatially/unequal fishing assets/ gender/ethnicity Sea: 8-21% HH; Lagoon: 31-50% HH	Sea/lagoon difference; poor men and most women have little assets (exception in NW coast)
Intricate tenure: owners/tenants/hands/partners; 33-50% share to owner (marine); 5-10% tax to owner (lagoon)	Tenure is insecure for poor men and women have fewer opportunities
Complex markets: village trader/middleman/ auction; piece/string/kilo rate; local/national/global supply chains	Mostly male controlled; women at local level and dried fish in NW & W coast; terms of trade unfavorable for poor men and women

Understanding the poverty and gender interface in fishing communities in SL

Poverty factors	Gender implications
Seasonality/vulnerability/migration <i>"For six months we can live it up, for six months we are poor." (Hambantota)</i>	Women eat less; local: men migrate, women stay at home; international: women and men migrate
Lower education levels than farming communities	Women's education level equal to or higher than men's
Ambiguous land tenure Poor living conditions and sanitation <i>"We live in the wind." (Hambantota)</i>	Lack of privacy /security for women; willingness to move away from beach after tsunami (200 m buffer zone)
Dependency on a declining resource base (lagoon and near-shore) Fishing rights	Lower catches for women and poor men; resource conflicts between men; discourse of sorcery among women
Impact of armed conflict Restricted fishing; degraded resources; loss of tourism	Increased widows/ female-headed HHs; violence/lack of security; lower catches for all; taxes and trade restrictions for men, loss of firewood for women

Assessing poverty among resource users: Selected indicators, East Coast

field data 2003

Type of resource user	HH Size	Housing & sanitation conditions	Education level of HHH & spouse	Months of no/low work	# meals per day	Debts LKR/month	Reported income/person/month LKR (NPL =1294)
Gleaners	9-12	All types; no toilets	0	3-7	2-3		200-299
Wade fishers with cast nets	3-4	All types; few toilets	0- Primary	5	2		469-1,500
Tenant fishers	3-8	All types; some toilets	Primary- Junior Secondary	2-7	2-3	500-833	933-2,039
Fishing laborers	3-4	All types; few toilets	Primary – Senior Secondary	5-8	2	500	1,350 – 5,333
Canoe owners	3-5	All types; few toilets	0-Junior Secondary	4-7	2-3	500	718-2,433
Motorized Boat owners	5-6	All types; few toilets	0-Senior Secondary	3-7	3	670-11,500	2,709 – 15,813
Fisher-farmers	3-7	Temporary- semi- permanent; no toilets	0-Junior Secondary	0-2	3		650 – 3,243

Gendered perceptions of well-being

- Criteria for “success in life”
 - Fishing communities (W, Puttalam, Catholic and Hindu): money, well-built house, good family life, education of children
 - Farming communities (interior 3 districts, Buddhist): ease of mind; living without troubling others, education of children, health, good family life, living without debt, stable income
 - Women tended to mention education more than men in fishing communities



Gendered perceptions of well-being

- Well-being criteria (South coast Buddhist fishing village)
 - **Both:** stable income, education for children, secure/permanent house, secure life (without fear of disasters), good mental state, trust, unity and harmony in village, living without alcoholism, good physical health
 - **Women:** living without stretching one's palm out to others, providing nutritious food to children, society without alcoholism or drugs, good natural environment, having good/positive thoughts, living freely and justly without undue influence from others, turning towards religious life; suitable employment for school leavers and drop-outs
 - **Men:** Living without engaging in bad behavior, unity within family

(Weerackody and Fernando 2009)

Fishing within a fluid livelihood system

- Importance of fishing is often over-estimated by men
 - *"We've been fishers for seven generations"*
- Fishing is seasonal: 6-8 months, depending on area & gear
- Mechanization of boats/canoes from 1970s increased men's concentration on fishing - longer periods of fishing
- Multiple livelihoods: on average 2-3 per HH in South; 3-4 per HH in East
- Micro-enterprises of women provide more stable sources of income throughout the year



Gendered changes in livelihood strategies

Pre 1970s		Post 1970s ("Blue Revolution", conflict, tsunami)	
Men	Women	Men	Women
Marine S & W			
Fishing (migration two coasts) S & W	Processing, trading W (limited % in S); coir weaving (S)	Fishing (migration two coasts- restricted), construction labor, overseas migration, tourism, commercial farming (W)	Processing, trading, overseas migration, aquaculture, industrial employment, MSE, crafts, tourism
Marine E			
Fishing (local migration), textile weaving	Basket /mat weaving, processing, agricultural labor	Fishing (local migration), agricultural labor	Processing, agricultural labor, poultry, MSE, crafts, overseas migration
Lagoon (E & W)			
Fishing- farming, agricultural labor	Gleaning, farming, agricultural labor	Fishing- farming (restricted), agricultural labor, overseas migration	Gleaning, farming, poultry, agricultural labor, MSE, crafts, overseas migration

Hidden strengths of women

- *It is useless fishing. It is because of the women working abroad that there is an improvement here (in this village).* (Vansa, Malay ex-migrant worker in the Middle East, widow and mother of fishers, 48 years, Hambantota)
- *We managed to build our house because my wife went to the Middle East twice. Otherwise, can we build houses like this from fishing?* (Mohideen, male Muslim lagoon tenant fisher, 38 years, Trincomalee)
- *Both women and men are good at business. Women can take over the business and give money to the man of the house for three months. My mother can do business as good as I do. I can exceed my limits and hit somebody but my mother has more patience. We can't be stingy, have to help people when they are down. I'm at this stage because my mother developed the business to this level.* (Vamadevan, male Tamil Hindu boat owner and fish trader, 34 years, Puttalam)

Hidden strengths of women

- *Women here are better at business. Not like the men, they are more skilled. They buy at a lower price and sell at a higher price. Men don't even know how to use a weighing scale properly. (Kamala, female Sinhala Catholic fish trader, 43 years, Puttalam)*
- *Men are generally good at business. But my wife is very good at it. She runs around buying and selling fish. She does much more than I do. Men drink too much here. It is women's strength that sees everyone through . (John, male Sinhala/Tamil Catholic fish trader, 46 years, Puttalam)*

Hidden strengths of women

- Supplementing seasonal incomes
- Providing lesser but more stable/higher incomes
- Managing trading, processing and HH
- Providing savings and capital for investment
 - 50% of credit needs by pawning women's jewellery
 - Except multi-day boat crew HHs

Average annual HH borrowing by fishing crew HHs – LKR (NARA 2006)

Source	Multi-day	One-day	FRP	Traditional
Pawning	5,773	20,687	11,900	3,800
Friend	10,089	6,625	4,875	0
Money lender	5,572	3,125	2,875	3,750
Fish Co-op	5,523	8,437	1,256	0
Other	5,536	2,500	2,994	0
All	32,493	41,374	23,900	7,550



Mobility patterns and gender

- Spatial mobility
 - traditionally men but now both; internal and international
- Temporal mobility
 - men and women
- Occupational mobility
 - more pronounced among women
- Social mobility
 - accomplished by men through divesting from fishing; by women and men through investments in children's education



Mobility vs. diversification lens:

women support men's way of life and making a living (fishing) with increasing capacity for mobility - spatial, temporal and occupational

Conclusion

- Women and men have different understandings of the role of fisheries in their lives
- Women are not tied to fisheries as a "way of life"
 - do not necessarily want to "live in the wind"
- However, they support fisheries as a "way of making a living"; their support might be critical to its continuity
 - they provide more stable income sources to HH livelihoods diffusing the risk element in fishing
 - provide financial means to invest and reinvest in fisheries
 - look out for alternative livelihoods
 - invest in the next generation to move out of fisheries

Conclusion

- To respond to question “whose needs count?”, more research needed to generate gendered understandings of
 - multi-dimensionality/mobility in livelihood strategies
 - dynamics of poverty – correlating who is moving in and out of poverty with in/out of fisheries
 - Locally grounded notions of well-being
 - responses to changing structures/processes/ shocks
 - Market linkages and relations
 - place of fisheries in the economy – shift towards service sector
 - conflict & natural disasters

Thank you!

