

The Women Who Keep the Fish Moving: Fisherwomen of Coastal Odisha and the Economy Nobody Counts

In every fishing village along Odisha's 480-kilometre coastline, there is a division of labour so old and so deeply embedded in community life that it has become functionally invisible. The men go to sea. The women stay on shore and do everything else.

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Published: June 2026 · Last reviewed: June 2026

Everything else is a phrase that conceals an economy. The women sort the catch when the boats come in, often at 3 or 4 in the morning. They negotiate prices with traders and middlemen at the landing site. They carry fish on their heads to local markets, sometimes walking several kilometres in the early morning heat. They process the fish that cannot be sold fresh — cleaning, salting, drying, packaging for dried fish markets that supply Odisha's interior districts and reach as far as Andhra Pradesh and West Bengal. They manage the household finances, including debt repayments on fishing gear. They raise children during the months when husbands are away on longer fishing voyages. And when the sea-fishing ban periods arrive — the annual national ban from April 15 to June 14, and the seven-month Olive Ridley turtle conservation ban from November to May in Ganjam, Puri, and Kendrapara coastal stretches — it is the women who carry the household through the months when there is no fish and no male income.

Despite all of this, the Government of India's fisheries data structures are organised around the fishing boat as the unit of analysis. The head of the fishing household — typically male — is the registered fisherman. The women do not appear in most official data as "fisheries workers." They appear, when they appear at all, as dependents.

This Convergence Note is about fisherwomen — who they are, what they do, what the scheme architecture offers them, and what NGO and CSR programmes should understand before entering this space.

The Six Coastal Districts: A Brief Profile

Odisha's marine fisheries operate across six coastal districts: Ganjam, Puri, Jagatsinghpur, Kendrapara, Bhadrak, and Balasore. As of the last comprehensive survey, over 1.21 lakh persons were engaged in marine fishery activities in the state — approximately 74,980 full-time fishermen, 34,315 part-time, and about 11,987 occasional. Women are largely absent from these official headcounts, because the counting is done at the boat level, and women don't own or operate the boats.

The six districts are not demographically uniform. Ganjam in the south has a large population of fisherwomen who have historically been active in both fish vending and dried fish processing. Kendrapara, which includes the Chilika lake catchment at its northern edge and the Gahirmatha marine sanctuary — one of the world's largest Olive Ridley nesting beaches — has a particular intersection of fisheries economy and environmental conservation. Puri's Astaranga coast is another major Olive Ridley nesting site, creating a long annual ban period that especially affects the livelihood of fisherwomen in that stretch. Jagatsinghpur, a district through which the Mahanadi, Devi, Kathajodi, and Biluakhai rivers flow to the sea, is cyclone-prone and flood-affected with regularity.

The fisherwomen of these six districts share common occupational characteristics — post-harvest processing, marketing, credit management, household management during ban periods — but their specific economic situations, community organisations, and access to government schemes vary considerably by district.

What Fisherwomen Actually Do: The Three Domains

Post-harvest processing. Dry fish is a staple across Odisha and several surrounding states. The production of dry fish — cleaning, salting, sun-drying on raised platforms or mats, packaging for wholesale — is almost entirely women's work in coastal Odisha. The technical quality of the product depends on the skill of the processor: the amount of salt, the drying time, protection from rain and damp during the drying period, and packaging that prevents moisture reabsorption. These skills are learned generationally, passed from mother to daughter, and constitute a genuine technical knowledge base that is almost never recognised as such in skill development frameworks.

High-value species are typically processed for export (shrimp, pomfret) through processing units where women work as labourers rather than independent producers. Medium and low-value species — which constitute the bulk of landings — are marketed fresh or processed domestically. It is in this domestic processing and marketing economy that fisherwomen have the most agency.

Fish vending and marketing. The fisherwoman as vendor is the face of the fisheries economy in Odisha's towns and villages. She negotiates at the landing site, selects stock, prices it for her customer base, and manages daily cash flows that can range from a few hundred to several thousand rupees. She extends informal credit to regular customers, manages her own informal borrowing from moneylenders or local SHGs, and calibrates her market strategy to day-specific demand and supply.

Middlemen are a persistent structural problem. The Samudram experience in Ganjam — a federation of 250 fisherwomen SHGs with over 4,000 members, which at its peak in 2016 was transacting Rs 60 lakh per year with a 3 percent profit margin shared across SHGs — is the clearest documented example of what fisherwomen can achieve when they organise collectively to eliminate middlemen. Samudram built cold chain infrastructure (ice breakers, insulated boxes, deep freezers) at six procurement centres across Ganjam, Puri, Jagatsinghpur, and Balasore. The GST implementation in 2017 severely disrupted this model — the 12 percent GST on packaged dry fish made Samudram's wholesale price uncompetitive, and wholesale buyers walked away.

Household economic management during ban periods. The national fishing ban and the Olive Ridley conservation bans together create periods of 4–7 months each year during which marine fishing stops or is severely restricted. The state government provides Rs 7,500 annually to approximately 1,500 fishermen in the conservation ban zones — but this assistance goes to registered fishermen (male heads of household), not to the fisherwomen who bear most of the burden of keeping the family alive during the ban.

Fisherwomen in Ganjam have documented their adaptation strategies: poultry, goat-rearing, contract labour in agriculture, and in some cases migration to work in prawn and fish processing units in Andhra Pradesh during the ban season. These livelihoods are precarious and underremunerated.

The Scheme Architecture: What Exists for Fisherwomen

Pradhan Mantri Matsya Sampada Yojana (PMMSY)

Launched in 2020 as the flagship fisheries development scheme with an outlay of Rs 20,202 crore over five years, PMMSY is the most significant policy change for fisheries in India in decades. It includes specific components for women fishers:

- Support for women SHGs in fisheries sector activities
- Capital cost assistance for fish vending infrastructure (insulated boxes, bikes, storage equipment)
- Support for ornamental fisheries (aquariums, goldfish breeding) which is a

predominantly women-managed enterprise

- Seaweed cultivation support (coastal states, including Odisha)
- Support for women-led aquaculture enterprises

Union Minister Parshottam Rupala visited Odisha's six coastal districts in January 2024, meeting PMMSY beneficiaries including fisherwomen and laying the foundation for the Paradip Fishing Harbour modernisation. The political visibility of fisherwomen as PMMSY beneficiaries has increased; the translation into actual scheme disbursement at the village level is the implementation variable.

Matsya Sampada Card and Fishing Licence

Individual identification of fisherwomen as fisheries workers — rather than as dependents of fishermen — requires a formal identity in the fisheries system. The Matsya Sampada identity card and fishing licence structure is primarily designed around boat operators (male).

Fisherwomen engaged in post-harvest work can, theoretically, register as fisheries workers under state fisheries department records, which creates eligibility for certain benefits. In practice, registration of fisherwomen as independent fisheries workers rather than dependents is inconsistent across Odisha's coastal districts.

Kisan Credit Card — Fisheries Extension

The Kisan Credit Card (KCC) was extended to fisheries in 2019, providing working capital credit to fishermen and fish farmers at concessional interest rates. For fisherwomen who are engaged in fish vending and processing as independent businesses, the KCC provides a formal credit pathway. Access requires a bank account and documentary proof of fisheries activity — barriers that many fisherwomen face, particularly those who have never formally registered as fisheries workers.

Mission Shakti SHGs in Fisheries

The Kendrapara District Collector initiative documented in 2024 — integrating women SHGs into panchayat tank fisheries management — is a strong model. Under this approach (which won the Excellence in Governance Award under Gender and Inclusion in 2024), women's SHGs were given management rights over local panchayat ponds, with technical and financial support to establish sustainable fish culture. The programme created direct livelihood linkage between Mission Shakti's social capital and the Fisheries Department's technical resources.

This is a replicable model across Odisha's six coastal and several riverine districts. The ingredients are: an active SRLM/Mission Shakti SHG cluster, a willing Fisheries Department block officer, and a facilitating NGO or district administration.

National Scheme for Welfare of Fishermen (under the Unorganised Workers' Act)

The National Scheme for Welfare of Fishermen is among the welfare schemes mandated under the Unorganised Workers' Social Security Act 2008. It provides housing assistance (housing grants for fishing communities), provident fund contributions, and insurance. Access requires registration as a fisheries worker — again, the registration gap for fisherwomen is the primary barrier.

PMJAY and Health Coverage

Fishermen's families — including fisherwomen — are among the priority groups in SECC 2011 data for Ayushman Bharat eligibility in coastal districts. The specific occupational health risks for fisherwomen (prolonged sun exposure, waterborne infections from fish handling, respiratory infections from smoke-drying processes, musculoskeletal strain from carrying loads on the head) are not systematically addressed by any targeted health programme.

The Environmental Dimension: Women as Conservation Stakeholders

The Olive Ridley sea turtle conservation bans in Ganjam (Rushikulya river mouth), Puri (Astaranga), and Kendrapara (Gahirmatha) create a direct economic impact on fisherwomen. Samudram fisherwomen in Ganjam and Kendrapara have been among the most consistent protectors of Olive Ridley nesting sites — voluntarily monitoring nesting beaches, protecting eggs from poachers, and alerting authorities to trawler violations.

This conservation behaviour is economically irrational in the short term — the women who protect the nesting sites bear the income cost of the fishing ban but receive no compensation from the state government, which provides Rs 7,500 to registered fishermen only. The Odisha Traditional Fishermen Union has consistently demanded conservation compensation for fisherwomen, without success.

From an environmental CSR perspective, this represents a specific opportunity: companies whose CSR focuses on biodiversity or coastal ecology can partner with fisherwomen's organisations to provide conservation compensation and livelihood support during ban periods — directly linked to documented conservation behaviour. This is a model that has been used in some South Asian marine conservation programmes and remains largely unused in Odisha.

The Samudram Story: What Collective Action Can Achieve (and What Stopped It)

The Samudram experience in Ganjam is the most detailed available case study of fisherwomen's collective economic organisation in Odisha, and it is worth understanding in detail — both as a model and as a cautionary example of what can disrupt even well-organised collective enterprises.

Samudram started in the 1990s as a response to alcohol-related problems in fishing villages, where women organised to eliminate country liquor production and redirected that energy toward fish trade. Over time, the federation built:

- Six procurement centres with cold chain equipment across four coastal districts
- Market supervisor systems to track prevailing prices and prevent undervaluing
- An annual transaction of Rs 60 lakh at peak (2016)
- A federated structure of 250 SHGs with 4,000 members
- Coverage across 12 coastal villages in Ganjam and districts beyond

The GST disruption in 2017 — which imposed 12 percent tax on packaged dry fish, making Samudram's wholesale prices uncompetitive — collapsed the wholesale business. Individual fisherwomen went back to working separately, losing the collective bargaining power they had built.

The lesson is not that collective organisation doesn't work. It clearly does. The lesson is that regulatory changes at the national level can dismantle value chains built by the poorest producers without any mechanism for consultation or mitigation. For NGOs working in this space, engagement with regulatory frameworks (GST notifications, fisheries pricing policies) is as important as operational programme design.

For NGOs: Programme Priorities in the Fisherwoman Space

1. Registration as fisheries workers. The first priority is ensuring that fisherwomen who are economically active in fisheries — processing, vending, aquaculture — are registered as fisheries workers in state records. This registration is the gateway to PMMSY components, KCC access, welfare scheme eligibility, and formal recognition that changes how the fisheries system responds to them.

2. SHG formation and SRLM linkage. Where fisherwomen are not already in Mission Shakti SHGs, facilitation of SHG formation and linkage to the SRLM structure creates access to the full range of rural livelihoods support — SHG credit, livelihood fund, enterprise development. The

Kendrapara pond fisheries model is a concrete programme design to replicate.

3. Cold chain and value-addition support. The capital cost assistance under PMMSY for fish vending infrastructure (insulated boxes, storage equipment) is specifically designed for fisherwomen. An NGO that facilitates the application, equipment installation, and use training for a cluster of fisherwomen SHGs is providing a tangible, measurable livelihood upgrade.

4. Ban-period livelihood diversification. Poultry, goat-rearing, seaweed cultivation (where coastal conditions permit), and handicraft/SHG enterprise during ban months. PMMSY specifically supports diversification for fishing communities during closed seasons.

5. Conservation compensation advocacy. Working with fisherwomen's organisations to document conservation behaviour and build the case for state-level conservation compensation that includes women as recipients, not just registered fishermen.

For CSR: Why Fisherwomen Are Underfunded Relative to Fishermen

The fisheries sector CSR in Odisha — from ONGC, from state-sector companies with coastal operations, from international development organisations with blue economy mandates — has historically focused on the fisherman (boat operator, male) as the primary beneficiary. This is a direct reflection of the government data structure that makes fishermen visible and fisherwomen invisible.

The business case for shifting CSR focus to fisherwomen is straightforward: fisherwomen control more of the domestic fish value chain than fishermen do. They are closer to the end consumer, they manage the post-harvest losses that reduce economic returns, and they are the economic managers of fishing households during the extended periods when fishing is banned. An investment in a fisherwoman's cold chain infrastructure or SHG credit access has an immediate and visible impact on household income and food security.

CSR metrics for this space: number of fisherwomen registered as fisheries workers, number of SHGs receiving PMMSY infrastructure support, number of fisherwomen accessing KCC credit, income change documented through pre-post surveys, and ban-period income from diversified livelihoods.

Schemes at a Glance

Scheme	Relevance	Nodal Department
PMMSY (PM Matsya Sampada Yojana)	SHG support, vending infrastructure, aquaculture, seaweed	Fisheries, Animal Husbandry & Dairying

Scheme	Relevance	Nodal Department
Kisan Credit Card — Fisheries	Working capital credit for fish processors and vendors	Agriculture / Banks
National Scheme for Welfare of Fishermen	Housing, PF, insurance (for registered workers)	Labour / Fisheries
Mission Shakti / SRLM	SHG formation, credit, livelihood linkage	Women & Child Development, Odisha
Ouwssb	Unorganised worker registration, welfare benefits	Labour & ESI Department
Ayushman Bharat PMJAY	Health coverage for eligible households	Health & Family Welfare
PMJAY — Sagar Parikrama	Fishermen and women welfare outreach	Fisheries (Central)
PMSBY (Pradhan Mantri Suraksha Bima)	Rs 2 lakh accident insurance	Finance / Banks
SDRF / Disaster Relief	Cyclone, flood compensation	Revenue Department, Odisha

The Women Who Keep It Moving

In the pre-dawn hours at every landing site on Odisha's coast, before the sun is up and before any market opens, the fisherwomen are already there. They are negotiating, sorting, carrying, processing, calculating. They have been doing this for as long as anyone can remember.

The system that is supposed to serve them — the fisheries department, the welfare schemes, the cooperative structures — was built with the fisherman, the boat, and the catch as the primary reference points. Fisherwomen are present in the economy and absent in the system. Changing that is not a complex policy problem. It is a recognition problem — a willingness to count what is there to be counted, and to build the scheme architecture around the full reality of what keeps the fisheries economy of coastal Odisha functioning.

Sources: Earth Journalism Network — “Fisherwomen in Odisha Unite ” (2023); Mongabay India — “Ganjam Fisherwomen Unite ” (2020); VillageSquare.in — “Enterprising Odisha Women Take to Selling Fish ”; Indian Masterminds — Kendrapara Collector fisherwomen SHG initiative (2025); ResearchGate — “Gender Roles and Livelihood Analysis of Women in Dry Fish Processing, Coastal Odisha ”; ICSF Samudram documentation; Department of Fisheries, Gol — Monthly Summary January 2024; PMMSY scheme guidelines.

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