

The Socio-Economic Implications of Decline in Artisanal Fishing and its Effect on Women: A Case Study of Shams Pir Island, Karachi

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Abstract

Artisanal fishing is carried out in the coastal villages of Karachi. Through centuries, these fishing villages have maintained their traditional practices of fishing. Shams Pir Island is in vicinity of Karachi coast. The main occupation of islanders is artisanal fishing which is extremely threatened by various factors. Historically, in coastal communities of Karachi, women were part of fishing and its related activities. With the decline in traditional fishing methods, females have been withdrawn from fishing work. Implications of this process have been drastic for fishing households such as increased poverty, unemployment, environmental degradation etc. The research is conducted to highlight these problems especially from gender perspective. It is exclusively based on females of Shams Pir Island. Female's socio-economic conditions, family status, perceptions on different contemporary issues pertaining to the endangered livelihood of their family and its relation with environmental changes is investigated in particular. In total, sixty women representing fishing households, few community leaders and representatives of fisher folk's NGO were interviewed. The results emphasized the livelihood issues of females and their perceptions on environment and climate change. The vulnerabilities of females in fishing communities have been discussed in detail.

Introduction

Karachi is the largest city of Pakistan with a population of 18 million.¹ It is the fastest growing city in the world with population density of 17,325 people per sq. kilometer.² Once, Karachi was a small fishing settlement. Its evolution and development into mega city comprises many stages. Rustomjee in his book *Karachi 1839-1947* narrated the memories of Seth Naomal regarding the foundation of Karachi in 1729 AD. 'There stood originally at the head of the bar about twenty to twenty-five huts of fisherman. The spot was then called Dirbo. There was also a pool of

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¹ Arif Hassan *et. al.*, *Karachi The Land Issues* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2015), p.1.

² *Ibid.*

water close by which was known by the name of ‘Kalachi’s Kun’—meaning deep ditch and Kalachi being the name of fisherman’.³ Some refer to a legend describing that the city was named after a fisher woman, Mai Kolachi. Usman Damohi writes in *Karachi in Mirror of History* that it’s ‘the only city in the region known by more than thirty names and Karachi’s oldest name was Karokala’.⁴

The British Army occupied Karachi in 1839 and later its annexation, in 1843, started the colonial period of the city. The British were smart enough to recognize the future strategic location of Karachi. Charles Napier praised Karachi at the time when it was a small town. He uttered, ‘You will be the glory of the East; would that I could come again to see you Karachi, in your grandeur!’⁵ British intentions were to develop its sea port generally, and specifically, Napier wanted Karachi to be a free port.⁶

After independence in 1947, Karachi became the capital city of Pakistan. The total population of Karachi by 1941 was 359,492.⁷ Millions of migrants flocked into the city from different parts of India, changing its demography. The urban sprawl also altered the land use pattern of Karachi. Traditionally, Karachi ‘has been conglomerate of neighbourhood – villages or goths’.⁸ With the growing population, goths in the periphery of Karachi started disappearing. Three types of *goths* or villages have developed in Karachi: coastal, rural and urbanized. ‘Coastal goths are settlements along the coast where livelihoods are dependent on fishing and allied activities. These communities are considered the descendants of the original settlers of Karachi’.⁹ According to Orangi Pilot Project (OPP), ‘there are 2,173 old traditional

³ Behram Sohrab H.J. Rustomjee, ‘Karachi 1839-1947’, Book 1, in *Karachi during the British Era* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2007), abridged volume, p.21.

⁴ Muhammad Usman Damohi, *Karachi in Mirror of History* (Karachi: Royal Book Company, 2016), p.5.

⁵ Hamida Khuhro & Anwer Mooraj, *Karachi: Megacity of our Times* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2010), 2nd ed., p.ix.

⁶ Muhammad Usman Damohi, *op.cit.*, p.96.

⁷ Hyderi, Shamsheer al and Pirzado, Anwar, *Exploring Sindh* (Karachi: Information and Archive Department, Government of Sindh, 2010), p.134.

⁸ Hamida Khuhro & Anwer Mooraj, *op.cit.*, p.xiv.

⁹ Farhan Anwar (ed.), *Rural Karachi: A Case Study* (Karachi: Shehri, 2014), p.11.

settlements in Karachi located in the periphery town of Bin Qasim, Gadap and Kemari. 573 goths have become urbanized settlements'.¹⁰

Karachi's coast line is 27 kilometer long.¹¹ There are many fishing villages located on the coastal belt of Sindh. In Karachi, few have maintained their traditional culture and economic traditions. Shams Pir Island is one such village. It has retained its cultural identity since centuries. It is located in Kemari Town, District South of Karachi. The population of the island ranges from 2300 to 2500. The only access to Shams Pir is through small boats. The ferry service is operational from morning to midnight. The island is surrounded by the mangroves forest and the water around it is hazardously polluted. Large number of population is linked with artisanal fishing. The largest ethnic group on this island belongs to Mir Bahar tribe, called Mohonas. Alexander F. Baillie in his account praised their expertise. 'The Kurrachee boatman, who are stated to have been both bold and skillful. They were called Mohonas, and were respectable hardy fellows of a better class than the Mohonas of upper Sind'.¹² Sindhi is widely spoken, while other languages especially Urdu and Katchi are also spoken. The culture of artisanal fishing is widely depicted in the area.

The research is an attempt to answer how decline in traditional fishing has affected the livelihoods of fishing community (Shams Pir) and what have been its negative impacts on women.

Methodology

The research is based on both primary and secondary data. The methods employed in primary data collection include field observation, focus group discussion and interviews. Sixty females of fishing household were interviewed. The detailed discussions were arranged with the former councilor of Shams Pir Island, representatives of fishing communities and members of Pakistan Fisher Folk Forum (PFF), an NGO.

The universe of study is Shams Pir Island, Karachi. The population comprises of sixty females of fishing household. Purposive sampling technique is used in the research to ensure a balanced sample including variety of age, marital status, socioeconomic status, and educational and occupational categories.

¹⁰ Shehri, *People and the Land Empowering Communities for Social Justice: Rural Karachi - A Case Study* (Karachi: Shehri, 2013), p.46.

¹¹ Arif Hassan, *op.cit.*, p.217.

¹² Alexander F. Baillie, *Kurrachee: Past: Present and Future* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1975), p.30.

Findings

1. Biographical data of respondents

Table 1: Age

No.	Age (years)	No. of Respondents
1	Below 18	2
2	19-40	36
3	41-65	20
4	Above 66	2

Table 2: Educational level

No.	Level	No. of Respondents
1	Nil	60
2	Up to primary	Nil
3	Secondary school certificate	Nil

Table 3: Marital status

No.	Status	No. of Respondents
1	Single	5
2	Married	46
3	Widow	9

Table 4: Mother tongue

No.	Language	No. of Respondents
1	Sindhi	55
2	Balochi	5
3	Other	Nil

2. Types of residence and housing facilities

Table 5: Basic housing facilities

No.	Facilities	Yes
1	Non-concreted House	8
2	Concreted House	52
3	Hut	-
4	Electricity	53
5	Natural Gas	36
6	Lavatory	27
7	Piped Water	Nil

3. Economic status and activities

Table 6: Ownership of boats by fishing household

No.	No. of Boats	No. of Respondents
1	Nil	47
2	1-2	12
3	More than 2	1

Table 7: Monthly Personal Income (PKR)

No.	Income	No. of Respondents
1	Nil	33
2	1000- 5000	7
3	5001- 10,000	20
4	More then 10,000	Nil

Table 8: Monthly Family Income (PKR)

No.	Income	No. of Respondents
1	Less than 10,000	11
2	More than 10,000	37
3	More than 25,000	12

Table 9: Economic and fishing activities of women

No.	Activity	No. of Respondents
1	Fishing	15
2	Staying at different islands	7
3	Unloading fish catch from boat	23
4	Cleaning fish/shrimps/crabs etc.	46
5	Selling	8
6	Weaving net	31
7	Mending net	33
8	Salting/ Drying fishes and shrimps	58
9	Angling	4
10	Pruning trees & collecting of brush wood	42

3. Perception of respondents about socio-economic deterioration

Table 10: Perception about causes of environmental degradation

No.	Cause	No. of Respondents
1	God	29
2	Man	9
3	Nature	5
4	Man-Nature Both	14
5	Don't Know	3

Table 11: Factors causing pressure on economic conditions of fishing community

No.	Factors	No. of Respondents
1	Decline in marine resources	59
2	Decline of traditional fishing methods	52
3	Withdrawal of women from fishing activities	4
4	Influence of non-natives in fishing communities	10
5	Aquatic pollution	56
6	Mangrove deforestation	54
7	Climate change	25

Table 12: Respondent's perception about family's altered economic status

No	Status	No. of Respondents
1	Earlier better-off	54
2	Now improved	Nil
3	No change	6

Table 13: Respondent's health condition

No	Condition	No. of Respondents
1	Good	22
2	Satisfactory	26
3	Poor	12
4	Critical	Nil

Table 14: Respondent's perception about their class status

No.	Class Status	No. of Respondents
1	Very poor	14
2	Poor	38
3	Middle Class	8
4	Rich	Nil

Discussion

There are many factors affecting the traditional livelihood of coastal villages. The descendants of original tribes of Karachi now feel being neglected and marginalized in development activities. The benefits of urbanization and development have not been shared by poor fishing communities. Located in the purlieu of megacity, the islanders are deprived of very basic necessities such as drinking water, sanitation and medical care, etc.

The island respondents have highlighted the following factors causing decline in artisanal fishing:

- a) *Commercial fishing*: The residents of Shams Pir blame large trawlers and commercial fishing activities for threatening their livelihood.
- b) *Overexploitation of marine resources*: The overexploitation of fish and shrimps by the large vessels has reduced the fish in area. These vessels continue their operation in the months when traditional fishing has been stopped. This depletes the marine resources at faster level.
- c) *Use of banned nets*: The fishing community, comprising Mohanas and Mir Bahar, is very vocal against the use of dangerous net prepared by outsiders in the past five decades. The non-natives use *Bolo Gajjo* and *Katra*. These nets are banned as it also catches juvenile fishes because of its small size mesh. The juvenile fish is of no importance but used in poultry feed. For little amount of money these people are putting an end to the fish resources.
- d) *Influence of mafias*: Like other mega cities of the world, in Karachi various mafias are too strong to be controlled by the authorities. Coastal communities have been the victims of such mafias. Illegal encroachments and cutting of mangrove forest to reclaim land for commercial purpose are constant threats to coastal villages. Huge investments in large fishing vessels purchases by the non-natives also put pressure on indigenous fishermen, who are not prosper enough even to buy small vessel equipped with advanced technology.

- e) *Destruction of coastal ecology*: Since centuries, coastal ecosystem has been respected by the indigenous people. It is because sustenance of flora and fauna of the area guarantees their livelihoods. The fishing communities never took actions to destroy the natural environment and to degrade the resources, unlike the outside forces.
- f) *Lack of sustainable policy for traditional fishing*: The fishing communities accuse government and concerned authorities for not formulating policies to protect and sustain artisanal fishing on which thousands of fishing households are dependent; rather they encourage commercial fishing activities, in which huge capital is invested by those who exploit marine resources ruthlessly and leave the area depleted and barren. Unfortunately, such capitalists have access in policy making institutions and poor fishermen have no say in decision making.

Impact on women of fishing household

The decline in artisanal fishing has affected the females in following ways:

- a) Withdrawal of women from centuries-old traditional occupations
- b) Lesser opportunities to work
- c) Switching to other occupations
- d) Influence of non-natives on fishing communities further marginalizing women
- e) Worsening health due to poverty and pollution
- f) Increased household poverty forcing women to work in non-family environments

The sixty female respondents belonged to different age groups. Majority of them (36) were mature and between nineteen to forty years of age group. Twenty females were in age bracket of forty-one to sixty-five. Two were minors and two were elderly respondents. The elderly respondents' information is significant to understand the changes in traditional community. It is very unfortunate that all respondents were illiterate. All of them were Muslims and could recite and read holy Quran but did not receive school education. Forty-six respondents were married; nine widows and only five were single. In patriarchal society, married female enjoys privileged status so the married respondents considered their opinion more valuable and mature than those who are not married. The mother-tongue of fifty-five respondents was Sindhi and only five female's language is Balochi; and they came to island after marriage.

Majority of the respondents—fifty-two—lived in concreted (*pucca*) houses; only eight resided in non-concrete (*katcha*) houses.

Fifty-five respondents had electricity at home and thirty-six have natural gas to use as energy source. Only twenty-seven females had lavatories at their home. None of the respondents had piped water facility. Poverty and deprivation of the basic facilities are the major issues of this island.

According to the respondents their socio-economic conditions have deteriorated because of declining fishing culture in the area. A respondent shared that if her husband stayed at home because of any reason, they would have nothing to eat and their family would sleep hungry at night. Another respondent disclosed that if her husband came back empty handed or with lesser fish catch, they would be unable to feed their children after two days. Large number of respondents shared similar experience of starvation or lesser food to eat when fish is not available in sea. They were passing through tough time as some of the families had taken credit from money-lenders to buy fuel and other things for the boat. When they cannot get enough fish catch their debt multiplied, increasing poverty.

Majority of respondent households—forty seven—did not possess fishing vessels. Only twelve respondent's family owned one or two fishing boats. A single respondent (wife of local leader) declared of having more than two boats owned by her family.

Female's personal earnings were negligible. About thirty-three respondents had no personal income; seven earned five thousand rupees and twenty respondents' got five to ten thousand rupees monthly whereas not a single respondent earned more than ten thousand rupees per month. Females who earned ten thousand rupees per month were engaged in different works. Most of them sold fish, *pakor*s and *nimko*, party hats, clay toys etc. Some used to weave and mend fishing nets too. When it comes to the family income, eleven respondents family earn less than ten thousand rupees; thirty-seven household incomes is more than ten thousand rupees and only twelve respondent's families earned more than twenty five thousand per month. It reveals that majority of fishing households are trying hard to meet both ends meet. Their income was meager and they do not enjoy subsidies or privileges provided by the government to reduce poverty. Most unfortunately, they are deprived of drinking water, sanitation, education and health care too. There is no piped water available for the islanders. They purchase ten liter water cane in twenty rupees for drinking. There is no hospital either, public or private, on the island. There is a dispensary where doctors rarely show up. In case of emergency, patients are taken to Kemari town and the only access to other parts of city is ferry service. There is no road link to connect Shams Pir Island to the city. The ferry service is operational from morning to mid-night. Community members told that few pregnant

women died on island because their condition turned critical at night and there was no source to take them to hospital across the island. The health conditions of females are not very sound. Though, twenty-two respondents claimed to enjoy good health and twenty-six satisfactory, only twelve respondents admitted their poor health condition. Almost, all the respondents seemed pale and anemic and children appeared malnourished. Three respondents had heart attacks in last two years and few are suffering from hepatitis A and B. Community members stated that in last three to four years vector borne diseases have become common on island. Malaria is spreading and poor people have neither protective equipment nor curing medicines. The educational facilities are not up to the mark either. There is a government primary and secondary school where teachers seldom take classes. Few tutors do turn up but the overall situation is very discouraging. Boys are enrolled and female student's enrollment in secondary section is limited.

The respondent's perception about changed family status reflects their reality. Majority of the respondents—fifty four—declared that their economic condition was well in past decades. With the decline in fishing work, poverty has increased and their economic status has fallen. Six respondents claimed that no change had taken place as far as economic status of their family is concerned. Not a single respondent reported that her economic status had improved in the past decades.

When inquired about the fishing and its allied activities, respondents complained that decades ago they have been withdrawn from centuries old occupation. For instance, fifty to sixty years back, females accompanied males on fishing trips. They stayed at different islands near the coast. Women cook food, clean and salt fishes. After a week or two they came back with sufficient fish catch. Now this practice has been finished. Males avoid taking females on fishing trips. Only seven respondents claimed that in last decades they have joined their family members on such trips. Fifteen respondents still goes for fishing but on day trips only. They refrain to stay on other islands. Twenty respondents unload fish catch from boats. Forty-six respondents clean shrimps and fishes after unloading. Only eight respondents sell fish on island. Large number of females—fifty-eight respondents—work includes salting and drying of fishes and shrimps. Thirty-one responded says that they weave nets and thirty-three females mend fishing nets time to time. Forty-five respondents prune mangrove trees and collect brush wood. It is interesting that females use small boats to access mangrove forest. They return with huge quantities of fodder for their cattle. The smallest number of respondents engaged in fishing activity, is of angling. Only four respondents have experienced this work.

When asked about the specific causes of declining artisanal fishing, almost all—fifty nine—respondents agreed that in past decades there has been a tremendous decline in marine resources. Fishes has been depleted from the area around island. Large vessels continue fishing throughout the year, depleting the valuable marine resources. Poor fisher men go for fishing and come back either empty handed or with very little catch which cannot support their family for a week or two. Fifty-two respondents shared that traditional fishing is on the verge of ending in the coming days. Fifty-six respondents blame aquatic pollution for turning their clean water into sewerage and gutter. They criticize civic authorities for not stopping untreated sewerage and industrial waste dumping into sea. They are certain that aquatic pollution is the most threatening factor for their livelihood as well as for health. An old lady recalled her memories that seventy years back water around Shams Pir Island was crystal clear. That was the time when fish was abundant; mangroves were too dense, many species of birds were found in dense forest. Now seagulls, pelicans, blue and red sparrows are no more. One can only see black crows crying on nearby island. The removal of mangrove forest is also negatively affecting the livelihoods and environment of the islanders. Fifty-four respondents' stressed that because of removal of coastal vegetation fish and shrimps have decreased in the sea. Coastal vegetation serves as nursery of many marine species. Ten respondents accused non-natives and their activities for illicit cutting of mangrove trees. They believed that influence of outsiders (non Mohanas and Mir Bahars) has caused many problems in their community. At times the outsiders work on behalf of land and timber mafias and cut down entire stock of trees to sell in market. They have no regard for environment or coastal resources. For them mangroves is a commodity which can be sold at good price. Contrary to non-natives the islanders believes in conserving and preserving the valuable natural resources of their land. The sustenance of natural resource guarantees their livelihoods. Only twenty-five females considered climate change as a greater issue in future. Fourteen respondents admit that due to different pressures they have been withdrawing from fishing occupation. Large number of women prefers to stay at home and very few managed to start alternate work at their home. According to them switching their traditional occupation with some other work is difficult but now their economic conditions are compelling them to find some other work in order to feed their children.

It is quite surprising, when females were questioned about the entity responsible for their deteriorating economic conditions, many were confused to come up with the single answer. Twenty-nine respondents

firmly believed in God's will. Fourteen thought humans and nature both are causing troubles for poor communities. Nine females considered humans for creating issues for their community. Only five respondents opined that nature has turned against them. Three females had no idea that who could be blamed for their condition.

Conclusion

The fishing community of Shams Pir Island is far left behind in progress and prosperity. Their location and absence in policy making institutions have been keeping them marginalized. Females are more vulnerable as they have fewer options to switch their occupation. The psychological burden along with the physical stress has been dangerously intimidating women's and their children's lives. For centuries, fisherwomen in this region enjoyed the equal status and were considered as brave, strong, skilled persons like their male counterparts. The induction of modern technology in fishing has directly targeted females confining them at home. It's difficult for them to switch their centuries old occupation but poverty has been compelling them to look for other prospects too. The traditional occupation of artisanal fishing and its related culture is dying in Karachi. First it was females who withdrew and it is feared that male will be next to follow.