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# Transforming Lives of Fisherwomen through Occupational Mobility & Empowerment in Coastal Kerala

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## Abstract

This paper examines the empowerment of fisherwomen in coastal Kerala who have transitioned from fisheries to alternative occupations. Using survey data from 309 respondents across Trivandrum, Kollam, and Alappuzha, and a four-dimensional empowerment framework—economic, personal, social, and political—the research reveals substantial improvements in all areas. Inter-sector occupational mobility drives more robust empowerment than intra-sector shifts, manifesting as better income stability, heightened self-confidence, greater social participation, and enhanced political engagement. Results from independent sample t-tests indicate statistically significant differences between groups. The analysis positions occupational mobility as a transformative force in fostering sustainable empowerment among marginalized coastal women.

**Keywords:** Fisherwomen, empowerment, occupational shift, Kerala, multidimensional empowerment, coastal women

## 1. Introduction

Fisherwomen in Kerala have historically served as the backbone of the post-harvest fisheries sector, engaging in vital activities such as fish vending, drying, processing, and marketing. These roles, while central to coastal livelihoods and local economies, have traditionally been undervalued, underpaid, and largely informal. The sector is now struggling with a host of challenges including declining fish stocks, erratic weather patterns due to climate change, pollution, and overfishing. These ecological and economic stressors have not only jeopardized the sustainability of marine resources but also intensified livelihood insecurity for coastal communities—particularly for women who often occupy the most vulnerable positions in the fisheries value chain. In addition to these environmental pressures, fisherwomen are exposed to occupational health hazards, irregular and meagre income, lack of social protection, and minimal institutional support. These conditions have contributed to a rising trend of occupational mobility, where fisherwomen are increasingly shifting to non-fisheries sectors such as retail, tailoring, food processing, self-employment, and community-based service provision. This transition, while often born out of necessity, also presents a strategic opportunity for enhancing women's empowerment.

This paper seeks to explore the empowerment outcomes of such occupational transitions, with a specific focus on four key dimensions: economic, personal, social, and political empowerment. Drawing on Empowerment Theory (Kabeer, 1999), which defines empowerment as the process of gaining the ability to make strategic life choices in contexts where this ability was previously denied, the study examines whether occupational change has resulted in greater agency, resource access, and achievement among fisherwomen.

In doing so, the paper contributes to the growing literature on gendered livelihood transitions, coastal resilience, and women's rights. It also engages with Human Capital Theory, which emphasizes the role of skills and education in facilitating economic mobility; Structural Mobility Theory, which acknowledges the influence of broader socio-economic changes; and Social Network Theory, which highlights the role of relationships and community ties in enabling or constraining mobility and empowerment.

By grounding the analysis in primary data from 309 fisherwomen across three coastal districts—Trivandrum, Kollam, and Alappuzha—this study offers empirical insight into how marginalized women navigate occupational transitions and what implications these have for inclusive development and gender justice. The findings not only enrich our understanding of fisherwomen lived realities but also have practical implications for policy-makers, NGOs, and development practitioners aiming to support women's empowerment through livelihood diversification.

## 2. Review of Literature

Empowerment has evolved as a critical concept in development studies, especially in relation to gender and marginalized communities. Kabeer (1999) provides one of the most influential definitions, framing empowerment as the process by which individuals gain the ability to make strategic life choices in contexts where this ability was previously denied. Her tripartite model—resources, agency, and achievements—offers a robust foundation for examining how occupational transitions can alter women's power dynamics within households, communities, and institutions.

Empirical studies have expanded upon this foundation to assess empowerment in context-specific ways. Ibrahim and Alkire (2007) propose a capability-based approach, arguing that true empowerment must be measured across multiple dimensions—economic, personal, and social. Salim and Geetha (2013), in their study of fisherwomen in Kerala, underscore the gender-specific constraints and limited institutional support that hinder empowerment. Swain and Wallentin (2012) found that

microfinance participation improved women's decision-making capacity and self-confidence, both key indicators of personal empowerment.

In the context of fisheries, scholars such as Biswas and Rao (2014) and Gopakumar and Das (2014) emphasize the compounded vulnerabilities fisherwomen face due to environmental degradation, social exclusion, and economic precarity. These conditions have led to growing interest in non-fisheries employment as a pathway to resilience and empowerment. However, they also caution that mere access to alternative livelihoods does not automatically result in empowerment—it must be accompanied by institutional support, skills training, and social recognition.

Recent literature also engages with the structural and relational aspects of empowerment. Mayoux (2001) and Narayan (2005) argue that empowerment must be both individual and collective, highlighting the importance of social capital, community participation, and political voice. Thus, the current study builds upon this growing body of work by empirically examining how fisherwomen in Kerala experience empowerment post-transition—across four dimensions: economic, personal, social, and political.

### 3. Theoretical Framework

This study integrates multiple theoretical lenses to understand the empowerment outcomes of fisherwomen following occupational mobility. At its core, the research is grounded in Empowerment Theory, particularly Kabeer's (1999) framework, which conceptualizes empowerment as the expansion of individuals' ability to make meaningful life choices through access to resources, agency, and achievements. Complementing this is Human Capital Theory (Becker, 1962), which explains how skill acquisition and investment in personal capabilities enhance economic returns and personal autonomy—factors especially relevant to inter-sector transitions.

To contextualize the broader drivers of occupational mobility, Structural Mobility Theory is employed to illustrate how environmental, economic, and institutional constraints—rather than personal preference—often compel fisherwomen to change occupations. Finally, Social Network Theory (Granovetter, 1973) helps interpret how informal ties and peer support systems facilitate both occupational mobility and subsequent empowerment, particularly in social and political domains.

### 4. Conceptual Framework

Empowerment in this study is understood as a multidimensional process that enhances individuals' ability to make strategic life choices, especially in contexts marked by historical exclusion or marginalization (Kabeer, 1999). Based on an extensive review of theoretical and empirical literature, the study operationalizes empowerment through four key dimensions:

Economic empowerment reflects women's capacity to generate income, control financial resources, and make independent economic decisions. Indicators include income stability, personal savings, access to credit facilities, and ownership of productive assets (Golla et al., 2011; Mayoux, 2001).

Personal empowerment dimension captures internal agency—encompassing self-confidence, emotional well-being, decision-making ability, and autonomy in personal and work life. It also reflects women's ability to balance work and family responsibilities (Ibrahim & Alkire, 2007).

Social Empowerment is measured through indicators such as social acceptance, participation in community activities, interpersonal communication, and access to support networks. It emphasizes the role of collective identity and societal recognition (Kabeer, 1999).

Political empowerment involves awareness of rights, participation in governance and civic life, and the ability to influence public decisions. It reflects a woman's ability to engage in political processes, either individually or collectively, and includes indicators such as involvement in local institutions, legal awareness, and advocacy (Narayan, 2005).

Together, these four dimensions provide a comprehensive framework to assess the empowerment outcomes of fisherwomen who have undergone occupational transitions.

### 5. Objectives

The primary aim of the study is to evaluate the empowerment outcomes of fisherwomen in Kerala following their shift from traditional fisheries to alternative occupations. The specific objectives are:

- Assess economic, personal, social, and political empowerment among fisherwomen who have transitioned out of traditional fisheries.
- Compare empowerment between intra-sector and inter-sector occupational mobility.
- Identify patterns and dimensions most affected by occupational mobility.

### 6. Methodology

This study adopts a quantitative cross-sectional design to examine empowerment among fisherwomen in coastal Kerala. Primary data were collected through structured questionnaires administered to 309 respondents selected from three coastal districts: Trivandrum, Kollam, and Alappuzha.

### Sampling and Data Collection

A stratified random sampling technique was used to ensure representation of both intra-sector and inter-sector occupational shifts. Respondents were identified through community organizations, self-help groups (SHGs), and local governance bodies.

## Measurement of Empowerment

Empowerment was operationalized across four dimensions—economic, personal, social, and political—using 20 indicators adapted from validated scales in existing literature (Golla et al., 2011; Ibrahim & Alkire, 2007; Narayan, 2005). Each indicator was rated on a 5-point Likert scale.

## Data Analysis

Data analysis was performed using SPSS (Version 25). Preliminary tests included checks for univariate normality, outliers, and homogeneity of variance (Levene's Test). Internal consistency was verified with Cronbach's Alpha values above 0.7, confirming reliability of the scales. To compare empowerment scores between intra-sector and inter-sector groups, independent samples t-tests were conducted across each of the four dimensions. Significance was set at  $p < 0.05$ , and results were interpreted using mean comparisons and t-statistics.

## 7. Results and Discussion

Empowerment Outcomes and Occupational Shift among Fisherwomen in Coastal Kerala

### Empowerment Outcomes After Occupational Shift

Occupational mobility among fisherwomen was examined in relation to four core empowerment dimensions—economic, social, personal, and political. These dimensions were analysed through paired and independent t-tests to determine the nature and magnitude of change following occupational shift, both within the fisheries sector (intra-sector) and across sectors (inter-sector).

The results demonstrate a substantial rise in overall empowerment levels after the occupational transition, with particularly notable improvements in personal and political empowerment. This pattern underscores how exposure to diversified livelihoods, access to institutional resources, and enhanced social networks contribute to women's empowerment beyond traditional fishing activities.

**Table 1: Consolidated Descriptive Statistics for Empowerment Before and After Occupational Shift**

Empowerment Dimension	Group	Before Shift (Mean $\pm$ SD)	After Shift (Mean $\pm$ SD)	Level Change
Economic Empowerment	Intra-sector	2.317 $\pm$ 0.542	3.730 $\pm$ 0.561	+1.413
	Inter-sector	2.125 $\pm$ 0.563	3.895 $\pm$ 0.584	+1.770
<b>Total Sample</b>		2.223 $\pm$ 0.556	3.808 $\pm$ 0.574	+1.585
Social Empowerment	Intra-sector	2.285 $\pm$ 0.611	3.700 $\pm$ 0.548	+1.415
	Inter-sector	2.050 $\pm$ 0.630	3.745 $\pm$ 0.521	+1.695
<b>Total Sample</b>		2.172 $\pm$ 0.619	3.724 $\pm$ 0.536	+1.549
Personal Empowerment	Intra-sector	2.152 $\pm$ 0.525	3.944 $\pm$ 0.478	+1.792
	Inter-sector	2.068 $\pm$ 0.497	4.161 $\pm$ 0.522	+2.093
<b>Total Sample</b>		2.112 $\pm$ 0.586	4.048 $\pm$ 0.551	+1.936
Political Empowerment	Intra-sector	2.264 $\pm$ 0.466	3.528 $\pm$ 0.528	+1.264
	Inter-sector	2.089 $\pm$ 0.497	3.910 $\pm$ 0.425	+1.820
<b>Total Sample</b>		2.181 $\pm$ 0.488	3.712 $\pm$ 0.517	+1.531

Empowerment Levels: 1–1.75 Very Low; 1.76–2.25 Low; 2.26–2.75 Below Moderate; 2.76–3.25 Moderate; 3.26–3.75 Above Moderate; 3.76–4.25 High; 4.26–5 Very High.

Source: Primary Data.

Table presents the descriptive statistics comparing empowerment levels of fisherwomen before and after their occupational shift across four dimensions—economic, social, personal, and political. The results clearly demonstrate that empowerment levels have improved substantially in all domains following the shift, with all post-shift mean scores rising to above moderate or high levels.

The mean scores of Economic Empowerment increased from 2.317 to 3.730 for intra-sector fisherwomen and from 2.125 to 3.895 for inter-sector fisherwomen, indicating an overall improvement of +1.585 in the total sample. This growth reflects enhanced income stability, increased savings, and greater financial control post-transition. The improvement was more pronounced among inter-sector fisherwomen, suggesting that alternative occupations provided higher income security and economic independence. This pattern aligns with Human Capital Theory, which asserts that shifts into more productive or diversified roles can elevate economic standing.

Social empowerment rose from 2.172 to 3.724 overall, showing a mean improvement of +1.549. This suggests that occupational mobility expanded social participation, recognition, and status in the community. Fisherwomen who moved beyond traditional fishing activities gained greater social visibility, acceptance, and respect. This improvement resonates with Social Network Theory, which emphasizes that broader professional and social connections contribute to empowerment through enhanced interaction and social capital.

The most remarkable improvement was recorded in personal empowerment, which increased from 2.112 to 4.048, representing a substantial gain of +1.936. This rise signifies greater self-confidence, independence, and decision-making ability

after the occupational shift. Inter-sector fisherwomen, in particular, demonstrated higher post-shift empowerment levels, indicating that exposure to new work environments boosted their self-esteem and agency.

Political empowerment improved from 2.181 to 3.712, an increase of +1.531, with inter-sector women again showing a greater rise (+1.820). The shift facilitated higher participation in local self-governance, cooperative societies, and community initiatives. This trend reflects a transition from peripheral roles to active civic engagement, suggesting growing awareness of collective rights and representation.

Across all four dimensions, empowerment levels moved from below moderate to high, signalling a transformative effect of occupational mobility.

**Table 2: Paired Sample T-Test Results for Empowerment Dimensions (Before and After Shift)**

Empowerment Dimension	Group	Mean Difference	t-Statistic	df	p-value
Economic Empowerment	Intra-sector	1.413	31.202	161	0.000*
	Inter-sector	1.770	38.412	148	0.000*
Total Sample		1.585	46.835	310	0.000*
Social Empowerment	Intra-sector	1.415	27.354	161	0.000*
	Inter-sector	1.695	34.286	148	0.000*
Total Sample		1.549	42.601	310	0.000*
Personal Empowerment	Intra-sector	1.792	33.115	161	0.000*
	Inter-sector	2.093	36.635	148	0.000*
Total Sample		1.936	48.231	310	0.000*
Political Empowerment	Intra-sector	1.264	23.039	161	0.000*
	Inter-sector	1.820	33.728	148	0.000*
Total Sample		1.531	36.803	310	0.000*

Significant at 5% level ( $p < 0.05$ ).

Source: Primary Data.

Table 2 presents the results of paired sample t-tests assessing the statistical significance of empowerment changes before and after the occupational shift. The findings show that all four empowerment dimensions—economic, social, personal, and political—experienced statistically significant improvements ( $p < 0.05$ ), confirming that occupational transitions produced measurable empowerment outcomes.

The mean difference of Economic Empowerment 1.585 ( $t = 46.835$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ) indicates a strong positive effect of occupational shift on economic status. Both intra- and inter-sector fisherwomen experienced significant gains, with the latter recording higher improvement (+1.770). The large t-values signify that increased income opportunities and financial autonomy after transitioning to alternative occupations were not due to chance but reflect genuine structural change.

A significant increase (mean difference = 1.549,  $t = 42.601$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ) was observed in social empowerment. The results confirm that fisherwomen's involvement in broader community and workplace networks led to improved social recognition and confidence. Inter-sector shifts yielded slightly stronger gains (+1.695), implying that diverse occupational engagement enhances social integration and support systems.

Personal empowerment exhibited the strongest statistical effect (mean difference = 1.936,  $t = 48.231$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ). This high t-value underlines a profound psychological and emotional transformation following the shift. Fisherwomen reported increased decision-making capability, assertiveness, and self-worth. The improvement was particularly striking among inter-sector respondents (+2.093), suggesting that occupational diversity fosters psychological resilience and self-identity growth.

The mean difference of 1.531 ( $t = 36.803$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ) reveals a statistically significant increase in political empowerment. This indicates greater involvement in collective decision-making and local governance activities post-transition. Inter-sector fisherwomen again registered higher gains (+1.820), reflecting that exposure to new social spaces nurtures civic awareness and leadership potential.

The paired t-test results confirm that all empowerment dimensions improved significantly ( $p < 0.001$ ), underscoring the robust positive impact of occupational mobility on fisherwomen's empowerment. The consistent pattern of higher gains among inter-sector women suggests that movement beyond traditional fishing activities creates broader economic, social, and psychological opportunities. These results substantiate the study's theoretical model, where Human Capital Development, Social Network Expansion, and Structural Mobility collectively function as key enablers of empowerment.

## 8. Conclusion and Recommendations

### Conclusion

The study confirms that occupational mobility serves as a powerful catalyst for the empowerment of fisherwomen in coastal Kerala. Analyses reveal significant improvements across economic, social, personal, and political dimensions after occupational shifts, with personal empowerment showing the most substantial rise. Inter-sector fisherwomen, who moved to non-fisheries occupations, experienced higher empowerment levels due to exposure to formal work settings and broader social networks. Economic advancement alone, however, was found insufficient without institutional and structural support. Overall, empowerment emerged as a multidimensional process underpinned by skill enhancement, social linkages, and socio-economic transformation.

### Recommendations.

1. Enhance skill development, digital literacy, and entrepreneurship training.
2. Improve access to institutional finance and microcredit for fisherwomen.
3. Strengthen SHGs, cooperatives, and women-led collectives for collective empowerment.
4. Integrate empowerment programs into local governance structures.
5. Ensure social protection through health, pension, and livelihood schemes.
6. Adopt gender-sensitive coastal development and policy frameworks.
7. Promote legal literacy and community awareness through SHGs and NGOs.
8. Establish continuous research and monitoring of empowerment indicators.

Occupational mobility is both a means and an outcome of empowerment. Strengthening this transformation through supportive policies, training, and inclusive governance can make fisherwomen's empowerment a model for sustainable and equitable coastal development.

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