

Dormant Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): Socio-Economic Vulnerabilities and Political Participation of Fisherwomen in West Bengal

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Abstract

In this study, socio-economic vulnerabilities, ecological problems and political engagement of fisherwomen in the coastal districts of Purba Medinipur and South 24 Parganas of West Bengal, India are rigorously analyzed. Fisherwomen's contributions are systematically devalued and structurally marginalized despite their ubiquity in the fisheries value chain. This study combines empirical demographic data, livelihood constraints, and grassroots political indicators to understand why global sustainability metrics including Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 1, 5, 8, 13, and 14 remain persistently dormant for these communities. The findings reveal a context of intersectional marginalization, compounded by exploitative informal *Dadon* debt system, significant lack of post-harvest infrastructure and forceful privatization of coastal commons through corporate aquaculture. Further, rigid forest governance structures, especially non-implementation of Forest Rights Act and the outdated Boat License Certificate (BLC) system in Sundarbans, continue to sustain severe human insecurities, especially for 'tiger widows'. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment gave progressive quotas for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions. Yet empirical evidence points to a conundrum in participatory governance. 35% of the elected female delegates have strong administrative independence, but a large proportion of them still are trapped in proxy leadership under patriarchal norms. The study urges a transition from a capital-centric Blue Economy to a Blue Justice paradigm to revive these dormant Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Policy mandates demand urgent attention to hyper-local financial inclusion, democratizing post-harvest infrastructure, robust ecological zoning and substantial political capacity-building to translate descriptive representation into authentic socio-ecological empowerment.

Keywords: Sustainable Development Goals, Fisherwomen, Blue Economy, Panchayati Raj Institutions, West Bengal.

Introduction:

The fisheries sector is an important part of West Bengal's agrarian economy and of strategic importance to the coastal economy, and makes a significant contribution to food security, employment and foreign exchange earnings. The state has a rich aquatic resource base

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including a 158 km long coastline along the Bay of Bengal, a continental shelf of 17,049 sq. km, and a vast network of interior open water systems, estuaries and brackish water fisheries (Visva-Bharati, 2016). The coastal districts of Purba Medinipur and South 24 Parganas are the physical, biological and economic heart of marine and estuarine fishing in the state, within the complex network of communities dependent on these aquatic resources (Visva-Bharati, 2016). In West Bengal, more than 3 million persons are engaged in the fishing industry, directly and indirectly, particularly in the marine and estuarine sector in these two coastal districts (Visva-Bharati, 2016).

Yet below the dominant macroeconomic discourses of industrial outputs and export earnings lies a deeply ingrained socio-ecological disaster. The workers driving this business are mostly poor, systematically excluded from formal economic protections and highly vulnerable to environmental shocks. Within this demographic, fisherwomen are one of the most marginalized groups, historically and systematically disenfranchised. In India, women make up over 47% of the marine fishing workforce and 44% of the inland fishing workforce (Mongabay, 2025). They are largely involved in labor intensive post-harvest activities such as sorting, curing, sun-drying, processing, net mending and local retail marketing (Mongabay, 2025; Dakshin Foundation, 2026). They are present throughout the fisheries value chain, but their contributions are constantly devalued, sometimes put into informal, indirect or simply an extension of unpaid household reproductive labor (Nandy, 2014).

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) provide an internationally agreed framework for the eradication of extreme poverty, the achievement of gender equality, the creation of decent work and the protection of vulnerable ecosystems by 2030. An empirical and critical analysis of the lived experiences of the fisherwomen in Purba Medinipur and South 24 Parganas shows that some of the important Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG 1 (No Poverty), SDG 5 (Gender Equality), SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), SDG 13 (Climate Action) and SDG 14 (Life Below Water), remain largely stagnant or “dormant” (Sustainability, 2024). Strong patriarchal systems, exploitative economic systems such as the informal debt-trap system, aggressive privatization of coastal resources (corporate aquaculture) and particular climate vulnerabilities of the Ganges-Brahmaputra-Meghna delta have severely undermined global sustainability metrics.

This paper offers an in-depth analysis of the socio-economic vulnerabilities, ecological concerns and political participation of fisherwomen in these two different yet interconnected coastal areas. This analysis of the interlinkages between demographic data, livelihood restrictions, ecological catastrophes and the complex dynamics of grassroots political participation through Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) and trade unions, elucidates why global sustainability indicators remain dormant for these women. It also outlines the structural changes required to re-energise these goals, and move towards a model of true socio-ecological justice.

Literature Review:

The scholarship on small-scale fisheries (SSF) has shifted from bio-economic yield estimates to feminist political ecology and sustainable development approaches (Nandy, 2023). It took

years to evolve. The change has been slow. New research finds more coastal governments are embracing the 'Blue Economy' to accelerate marine-based growth. But the models favor cash-intensive industries that harm conventional coastal communities, particularly women-centered ones (Mongabay, 2025).

The Indian Ocean Rim Blue Economy has been critiqued for capitalist enclosure that excludes small scale craft operators. Some criticisms are severe. In his seminal book *Life Above Water*, Jentoft (2019) argues that macroeconomic ambitions ignore the human realities of fishing communities. He famously criticized Sustainable Development Goal 14 (or "Life Below Water") for not calling out coastal populations who rely on aquatic ecosystems for their very survival. Jentoft and Chuenpagdee (2022) also note that participatory governance has to support the counter-narrative of "Blue Justice" in order to combat severe marginalisation of Blue Growth. The draft Blue Economy framework in India does not prioritise women's employment, even though women have historically been integral to the coastal sectors. Interlocking socio-cultural, economic and technological barriers confine women's participation in modern frameworks to informal, indirect and less lucrative actions (Mongabay, 2025). Blue Justice seeks to ensure that ocean-based development does not infringe on the human rights of vulnerable coastal populations by prioritising distributive, social, economic, regulatory and procedural equality.

Studies on the socio-economic conditions of coastal regions show a pronounced feminisation of poverty resulting from the displacement of technological resources. In the rural areas, the traditional methods of fishing were solely the domain of women as net-makers and fish providers, but Nandy (2014) notes that mechanised vessels and machine-made nylon equipment have replaced them. In her book "Voices of the Fisherwomen of West Bengal" Nandy (2023) has meticulously examined the ways in which women are still the backbone of the fishing industry, even though they are facing growing challenges to sustain their livelihoods. Thus, surplus fisherwomen are forced to engage in low-paid, unskilled and highly exploitative manual labor in commercial fish processing firms or traditional dry fish (Khathi) yards (Dakshin Foundation, 2026). Recent research by Galappaththi et al. (2021) and Das and Roy (2022) found that women in the dry fish value chains face problems in accessing credit and are paid substantially less (15-20%) than men for similar processing jobs.

The literature also cites the dadon system, an informal moneylender network that entraps uncollateralized fishers in generations-long debt (Frontiers, 2021). This artificial monopsony "continues to trap debt, discourage future savings, and disproportionately burden women to compensate for severe economic shortfalls in the home" (Ghosh et al. 2023). Women's economic precarity adds to their physical precarity in the Sundarbans. In her chapter titled "The Plight of the Tiger Widows of Sundarbans", Saha (2024) describes how "tiger widows" are marginalised by rigid state bureaucratic policies, stringent conservation laws and human-wildlife conflict, and have to face socio-economic and psychological hardships following the loss of their husbands.

There is much written about the greater political space given to women in rural India through the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act (1992) which institutionalized the Panchayati Raj Institution (PRI) system. The West Bengal Panchayat (Amendment) Act, 2012 (Nandy,

2026) introduced 50 per cent phased reservation for women in PRIs in West Bengal. This overview has rendered India a world star in promoting gender equality in local government, but researchers are still not sure of the real empowerment (Lex Localis, 2023).

Khatun (n.d.) has critically studied the PRIs in West Bengal and concluded that “proxy governance” is a general hindrance in the way of gender inclusive decentralised government. Research suggests that the support for Pradhan Pati or Sarpanch Pati (Journal IJAR, 2026) is based on household patriarchy, generational educational deficits and economic dependency of elected women. Marginalised women face more complex and higher levels of discrimination politically (Nandy, 2026). Research has shown that independent women leaders bring to the forefront important gender-specific issues as well as social welfare issues which ultimately benefits the goals of the local government (Nandy, 2026). Despite these hurdles.

Theoretical Framework:

The research employs Feminist Political Ecology (FPE) analysis. The theory is used extensively in coastal and agricultural research. Women and men are allocated different productive resource rights based on gender norms and patriarchal family hierarchies. FPE demonstrates how gendered power relations impact access to ocean resources, decision-making and the costs and externalities of environmental degradation, thereby complicating marine environmental governance. FPE on SSF does not believe that increasing women’s employment will solve socio-economic and institutional inequalities.

This study operationalises FPE through the lens of intersectionality. Intersectionality is critical in SSF research because of the multiplicative and concurrent effects of identity markers and fishing community diversity. West Bengali fisherwomen are socio-economically marginalised beyond gender. These are low education, high geographical exposure to climate change and human-wildlife conflict, and caste identities (mainly Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes). This paradigm enables researchers to investigate the role of intersectional identities in workplace adjustment and decision-making throughout systemic fishing industry disruptions.

“Blue Justice” completes the FPE approach by providing an alternative narrative to the capital-centric Blue Economy models. Academics like Jentoft and Chuenpagdee who study the way in which development projects exploit and enclose traditional fishers and violate their human rights advocate Blue Justice. Prioritise fairness in the economic, social, regulatory and procedural fields. This research draws on Blue Justice to evaluate inactive SDGs as socio-ecological injustice, as government and corporate actors fail to protect the most vulnerable coastal populations.

Methodology:

The present study of marine districts of Purba Medinipur and South 24 Parganas of West Bengal is descriptive, comparative and qualitative. The districts are different but not biologically isolated. In this study we use anthropological methods to capture complex power interactions and daily conflicts that are missed by quantitative surveys. Political ecology uses ethnography, participant observation and long-term field participation to critique grassroots representations,

discourses and power performativity. It illustrates the social factors that shape a fisher's perceptions of sustainability and survival, and the different ways of being they have.

Socio-Economic Vulnerabilities and the Architecture of Marginalization

Fisherwomen in West Bengal suffer from pronounced marginalisation on several counts. Caste dynamics, low levels of education, structural economic exploitation and lack of post-harvest infrastructure actively counteract the realisation of SDG 1 (No Poverty) and SDG 8 (Decent Work) by highly vulnerable population profiles.

Demographic Profiling and Intersectional Stratification: A close look at fisherwomen in Kultali Block (South 24 Parganas) and Ramnagar-II Block (Purba Medinipur) shows some big differences in age and caste groups. It's not just poverty- they're stuck at the intersection of caste, age, and social vulnerability (Nandy, 2014). Most folks in these fishing communities belong to the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, or Other Backward Classes. These groups have faced discrimination for generations (Laskar et al., 2023; Nandy, 2014). And, if you go out to the sea districts, the ones out there fishing are mostly from castes like Jalia Kaibarta, Jhalo Halo, Mal, and Rajbhansi. That's pretty much all of the traditional fisherfolk (FAO, 1986).

Total Sample Size:

Demographic Variable	Purba Medinipur (Ramnagar-II Block, Contai)	South 24 Parganas (Kultali Block, Sundarbans)
Total Sample Size	209 Fisherwomen	241 Fisherwomen

Age Distribution:

Purba Medinipur (Ramnagar-II Block, Contai)	South 24 Parganas (Kultali Block, Sundarbans)
Young (<30 years): 87	Young (<30 years): 103
Matured (30-50 years): 93	Matured (30-50 years): 119
Old (>50 years): 29	Old (>50 years): 19

Caste Composition:

Purba Medinipur (Ramnagar-II Block, Contai)	South 24 Parganas (Kultali Block, Sundarbans)
43.84% Chasi Kaibarta, 41.29% Rajbhansi, 8.73% SC (Namashudra), 1.25% ST (Santhal), 1.25% Jele Kaibarta	36% Scheduled Castes (SC), 32% Scheduled Tribes (ST), 12% OBC, 8% Traditional Fishing Castes

Source: Field Study

Data shows that most of the labor force consists of young and middle-aged women who are actively generating the extra money required to support their families (Nandy, 2014). In South 24 Parganas, there is a very high percentage of severely marginalized SC and ST groups, whereas Purba Medinipur is dominated by some castes such as the Rajbanshi and Kaibarta (Nandy, 2014). The schooling attainment of these cohorts is shockingly low. Most of these women are either completely illiterate or have only signature literacy which is a serious barrier to their socio-economic development (Laskar et al., 2023). This ignorance and unawareness make them still to remain “non-vocal” and unable to deal with formal banking institutions, understand complicated government schemes or defend their rights in front of local authorities (Nandy, 2014).

The Dadon System: Institutionalized Debt and Economic Stagnation

Deep-sea and estuarine fishermen find themselves in a bleak economic position in these areas. According to the study conducted by the researchers in Purba Medinipur, 31% of the fishing community lives in extreme poverty, 53% are poor and majority of them earn less than INR 10,000 per month (Maiti & Sinha, 2023). Mahajans are informal moneylenders, who provide capital to small-scale marine and estuary fishers for their needs for boats, nets and operational expenses throughout the fishing season (Frontiers, 2021).

This reliance sets up the dadon system, a secret, unwritten financial arrangement that automatically ties artisanal fishers to local elites. In return for the upfront financing, the moneylender demands the fisher to turn over all their catch at heavily discounted, below-market prices or pay costly commission fees when selling it to outside vendors at auction (Ghosh et al., 2023). The artificial monopsony destroys the market bargaining power of the fisher and guarantees an endless cycle of insolvency. The dadon system is a short-term financial aid that supports debt cycles and significantly weakens long-term financial stability (Ghosh et al., 2023). This compels women to compensate for the family’s large income shortfall by engaging in dangerous and poorly paid manual work in the informal sector.

Infrastructural Deficits and Post-Harvest Losses

The economic stagnation of these populations is further exacerbated by the serious dearth of post-harvest infrastructure in the coastal harbours of West Bengal, such as Shankarpur, Petuaghat and Fraserganj. Fishers suffer huge economic losses in quality and value due to rapid spoilage. The overall loss of fish is around 70% in the range of 5% to 15% of the total harvested fish (Visva-Bharati, 2016). Alarming, 40% of the total post-harvest loss in sale value is in the large range of 15% to 25% (Visva-Bharati, 2016) for boat owners.

These losses are directly linked to infrastructure failures. Immediate availability of ice is a serious constraint for about 90% of boatowners and 95% of fishermen, whereas 93% of fishermen say total lack of cold storage is a major operational problem (Visva-Bharati, 2016). Also, 87% of stakeholders are in favour of better basic shore facilities indicating problems with potable water, sanitation and hygienic conditions at landing sites (Visva-Bharati, 2016). The fishermen are not able to preserve their catch and thus are in weak bargaining positions and the wholesalers and intermediaries are able to have full control over the auction markets (Visva-Bharati, 2016). As a result of these constraints, a significant amount of the catch is subjected

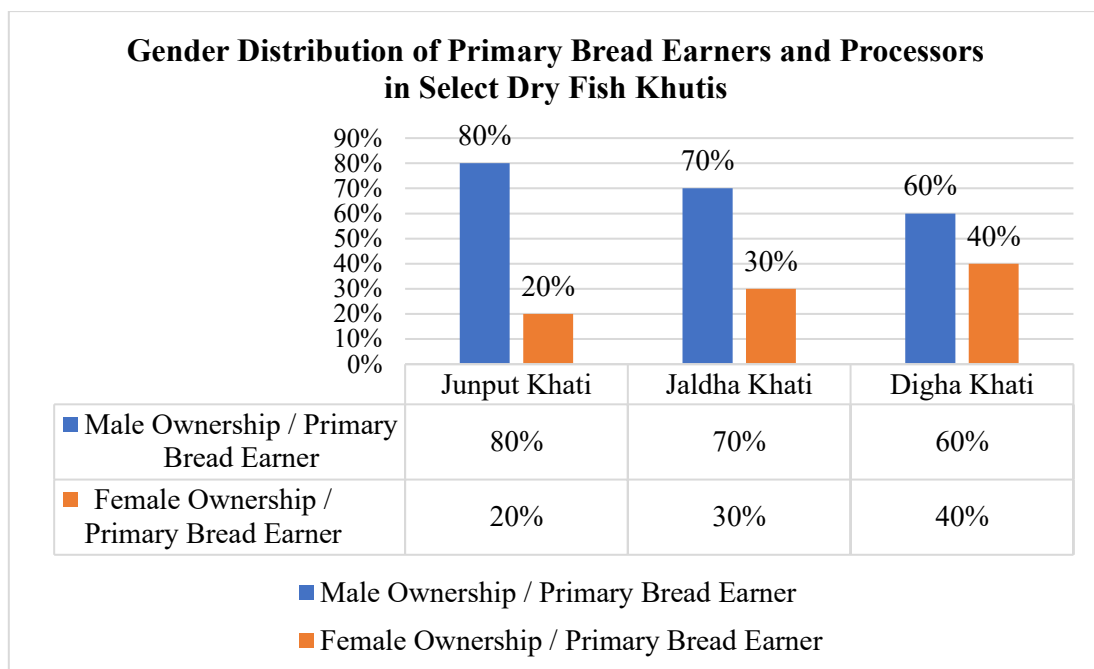
to traditional low-value processing methods, particularly sun-drying, which causes further losses due to infestations by bugs and contamination (Visva-Bharati, 2016).

Exploitation in Dry Fish (Khati) Processing

Local dry fish processing facilities, Khatis, hire many displaced and destitute fisherwomen. Fish drying is a popular practice in South Asia for a long time (Dakshin Foundation, 2026). (Purkait et al., 2018). It is popular along the Purba Medinipur coast (Junput, Jaldha and Digha mohana khatis) and in the Sundarbans during the harsh winter months from mid-October to mid-February. Sun drying provides protein and food security for inland tribal areas and low-income groups in India (Dakshin Foundation, 2026). 10% of the world's seafood is processed into dried or salted fish.

The sector backs local nutrition. But the pay of the hard-working women is miserable. A female dry fish worker's average winter salary is INR 3,000 (Purkait et al., 2018). The sector faces major structural problems like capital constraint, raw material shortages, exploitative middlemen and no product standard testing facilities (Purkait et al., 2018).

Furthermore, the ownership patterns and the main sources of income within the khati system are indicative of deeply ingrained, systematic gender disparities. Although women form the backbone of the physical labor force in sorting, washing and drying fish, the ownership of the khatis and the management of the resultant revenue are predominantly male controlled (Sahu et al., 2018).



Source: Field Studies

About 37% of women are engaged in the dangerous dry fish trade due to lack of any other economic options (Purkait et al., 2018). Khatis are also exposed to harsh coastal weather, harmful insecticides used for illegal fish preservation and lack of basic cleanliness which are a danger to their long-term health (Visva-Bharati, 2016). Thus, there is a need to take up focused

efforts to empower women fishers in this business to improve their socio-economic status (Purkait et al., 2018).

Ecological Violence and Bureaucratic Exclusion

The socio-economic vulnerabilities of fisherwomen are closely connected to the ecological degradation of their environments and the bureaucratic framework of coastal government. In both districts, assertive land-use alterations and inflexible conservation rules perpetuate structural violence against marginalised groups.

The BLC Crisis and the Failure of the Forest Rights Act

The situation in South 24 Parganas is largely based in forest governance. The Indian Sundarbans is a rigorously safeguarded Biosphere Reserve, accommodating a significant population of forest-dependent individuals in lower island villages who depend extensively on estuarine resources for sustenance- particularly fishing in narrow river creeks, collecting prawn seeds, harvesting crabs, and gathering wild honey (NIRDPR, 2017). Fisherwomen in these regions must engage directly with a hazardous environment populated by tigers and crocodiles (Nandy, 2014).

The 2006 Forest Rights Act (FRA) was passed to recognise the traditional rights of forest dwelling groups. The FRA, passed almost two decades ago, is yet to be implemented in the Indian Sundarbans (NIRDPR, 2017). Its implementation has been hindered by the Forest Department's unwillingness to relinquish centralised control over the forest and regional political interests influencing the implementation process (NIRDPR, 2017). The state government's reluctance to implement the Act affects the livelihoods of forest-dependent people and fuels persistent jurisdictional conflicts (NIRDPR, 2017).

Instead of the FRA, the state uses a 1980s Boat Licence Certificate (BLC) system (Nandy, 2014). The BLC system is beset by bureaucratic obstacles, lack of transferability, permits held by wealthy non-fishers, a booming black market and the forest department having stopped issuing new licenses (Sapiens, 2022). Marginal fishermen and crabbers are not eligible for a BLC and thus access forest waters illegally. The Forest Department has seized fishing nets, imposed heavy arbitrary fines and allegedly threatened to mix glass pieces in the sand along the riverbanks to injure barefoot fisherwomen (Frontier Weekly, 2015).

Climate Change and Existential Vulnerability

To these man-made and bureaucratic problems is added the existential threat of global climate change. The Bay of Bengal is notorious for its severe cyclonic activity. In 2019, cyclones and storm surges occurred five times more frequently in North 24 Parganas, South 24 Parganas and Purba Medinipur compared to 1970 (CEEW, 2021). Super-cyclones such as Amphan are destroying artisanal boats, homes and fishing gear (Intergovernmental Commission on Climate Change, 2021).

The continued destruction of mangrove forests for illegal aquaculture significantly exacerbates the impact of extreme storms on inland sites (ICSF, 2023). Mangrove forests are a perfect climate resilience option because they absorb shocks. "Mongabay (2025) asserts that

women in coastal areas are more vulnerable to environmental hazards. Women have fewer physical assets, limited access to official disaster recovery finance, and are excluded from macro-level climate adaptation policy, severely limiting their capacity to adapt to climate change (World SDF, 2022).

Political Participation, Agency, and Resistance

The systemic socio-economic and ecological marginalisation that fisherwomen are obliged to undergo intrinsically undermines their power to influence macroeconomic policy. But, democratic decentralisation through Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) has made possible the people at the grassroot level to participate in the political processes in a very organised manner. Moreover, despite the formidable challenges they face, fisherwomen have demonstrated their capacity for significant political agency through the formation of local unions and direct mass activism.

PRI Dynamics and the Paradox of Proxy Leadership

A comprehensive empirical analysis of elected women Pradhans (village heads) and representatives in the North and South 24 Parganas districts indicates a complicated and widely dispersed spectrum of political empowerment (Nandy, 2026). This was brought to light by the findings of the investigation. In spite of the fact that the fifty percent reservation policy has unquestionably contributed to the opening of doors in local government and ensured descriptive representation, many people continue to struggle to achieve substantive empowerment.

According to the data, sixty percent of the women who were elected to the position of Pradhans had either previous political experience or extensive family political connections, both of which played a highly significant impact in creating the opportunity for them to participate (Nandy, 2026). In contrast, forty percent of the women were directly nominated by local party leaders, despite the fact that they had absolutely no prior political experience. These women entered politics initially under the direct influence of their respective regional elites (Nandy, 2026). In spite of these several entrance routes, a significant majority of elected women (about seventy-five percent) frequently visit the panchayat office in order to carry out their responsibilities (Nandy, 2026).

When it comes to autonomy, however, attendance is not the same thing. On the basis of their institutional knowledge, administrative independence, and the absence of proxy control, these women's political empowerment can be divided into three distinct categories, which are as follows:

Level of Political Empowerment	Proportion of Women Pradhans	Characteristics and Administrative Autonomy
High Empowerment	35%	Possess comprehensive, thorough knowledge of the PRI three-tier system and local bureaucracy.

		Actively and independently manage administrative duties.
Moderate Empowerment	30%	Exhibit limited institutional knowledge. Unfamiliar with higher-tier block officers but successfully manage basic, localized administrative duties.
Low Empowerment (Proxy Control)	35%	Attend the office but lack actual understanding of governance functions. Decisions and administrative works are actively manipulated and controlled by husbands or male political party members.

Levels of Political Empowerment Among Elected Women Pradhans in 24 Parganas

Source: (Nandy, 2026).

Nearly one-third of elected women are figureheads in patriarchal proxy leadership (Nandy, 2026). Even as leaders, these women are driven by hatred. Nearly one-third of women respondents reported workplace gender discrimination (Nandy, 2026). Women from poor, tribal (ST), or lower-caste (SC) origins suffer multi-layered pushback from male coworkers when raising administrative difficulties (Nandy, 2026). Political threats include sexual harassment from women's political parties (Nandy, 2026). None of the polled women who encountered serious working challenges resigned from their elected positions, displaying strong personal resilience (Nandy, 2026).

Only 30% of women are “highly active,” consistently discussing general social welfare issues and pushing key gender-specific concerns during panchayat sessions. Mediating domestic violence, reducing underage marriages, improving local cleanliness, and securing welfare access for widows- a policy intervention pertinent to Sundarbans tiger widows- are among these challenges (Nandy, 2026). In contrast, 55% of elected women either believe they cannot raise issues or are uninformed of their legislative privileges (Nandy, 2026).

Grassroots Mobilization, Unionization, and Direct Action

Although formal institutional politics yields varied results, the fisherwomen of West Bengal decline to stay wholly non-vocal. Owing to the continual inadequacy of governmental systems to safeguard their rights, marginalised fisherwomen have increasingly engaged in direct activism, discovering essential avenues for collective action via grassroots organisations such as the Dakshinbanga Matsyajibi Forum (DMF) and the Sundarban Matsyajibi Joutha Sangram Committee (Nandy, 2014).

A pivotal phase of defiance transpired from March to September 2014. After a three-day sit-in fast protest against harassment by the forest department, about 1,000 fisherwomen and men endured intense monsoon rains to besiege the Sundarban Tiger Reserve Headquarters (Nandy, 2014). Their coordinated protests effectively compelled STR authorities to formally revoke arbitrary prohibitions on the use of traditional firewood and essential tools

(axes/choppers) in fishing vessels, and elicited a significant public acknowledgement from the authorities regarding the inherent deficiencies of the BLC system (Nandy, 2014).

Recently, these unions have led initiatives against widespread corruption in governmental benefit distribution. In 2024, in response to persistent demands from the DMF, the West Bengal government implemented the Samudra Sathi plan as part of the state budget (Bhattacharya, 2024). This program provides INR 10,000 (INR 5,000 monthly for two months) to qualifying marine fishermen to alleviate significant income losses during the enforced fish breeding ban period (May- June) (Bhattacharya, 2024). Nevertheless, extensive false registration by non-fishing individuals incited significant protests (ICSF, 2024). Fisherwomen and men conducted extended, month-long protests at multiple block offices and submitted petitions to the district administrations of South 24 Parganas and Purba Medinipur, demanding stringent verification procedures and the prompt annulment of registration cards granted to fraudulent beneficiaries (ICSF, 2024).

The Anatomy of Dormant Sustainable Development Goals

If we superimpose the complex empirical reality of the fisherwomen in West Bengal on the framework of the Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations' we find a major stagnation at the local level, systemic in nature of these global goals. The socio-economic vulnerabilities of these communities are not incidental consequences of progress; they are the intentional results of discriminatory economic policies, systemic ecological mismanagement and entrenched patriarchal institutions.

Sustainable Development Goal 1: Eradication of Poverty

SDG 1 seeks to eliminate extreme poverty globally and enhance the resilience of the impoverished against climate-related severe occurrences. The dadon credit system severely undermines the aspirations of the fisherwomen in West Bengal, acting as an economic trap that perpetually ensnares families in insolvency while extracting the surplus value of their labour (Ghosh et al., 2023). The bureaucratic refusal to enforce the Forest Rights Act and the consequent absence of automatic state compensation for victims of human-wildlife conflict in the Sundarbans ensures that the abrupt death of a male provider immediately relegates the surviving women and children to complete destitution (NIRDPR, 2017). The absence of formal financial institutions designed for uncollateralized artisanal fishers renders the elimination of poverty a structural impossibility.

SDG 5: Gender Equality

SDG 5 seeks to eradicate all forms of discrimination against women and girls, while ensuring their full and effective participation and equitable opportunities for leadership in all levels of decision-making. The situation in the coastal fishing sector presents a clear and disheartening disparity. Women are systematically demoted to the periphery of the value chain, assigned to perilous, low-wage occupations such as dry fish processing, while men predominantly retain ownership and revenue (Sahu et al., 2018). Despite being incrementally advanced to political leadership via the PRI's 50% quota system, 35% of women are relegated to proxy leaders, significantly restricted by male relatives or party insiders who usurp their administrative

independence (Nandy, 2026). Consequently, gender equality is stagnant, ensnared in the substantial chasm between progressive legislative aspirations and regressive social implementation.

Goal 8: Economic Growth and Decent Work

SDG 8 promotes equitable, sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment, and decent work for all, but West Bengal's post-harvest infrastructure cannot support it. The khati system's absence of modern cold storage, hygienic processing centres, timely ice supply, and safe transportation leads women to work in dismal, hazardous conditions for INR 3,000 per month (Purkait et al., 2018). The aggressive macro-economic push for a corporatized, export-oriented Blue Economy, which encourages mechanisation and intensive corporate aquaculture, destroys decentralised, traditional local labour markets where fisherwomen thrived as independent vendors and net-makers (Mongabay, 2025).

SDG 13: Climate Action

Super-cyclones and growing storm surges smash coastal West Bengal, which is at the forefront of global climate change (CEEW, 2021). SDG 13 demands financial capital, land security, and ecological buffers to improve adaptive ability. Uncontrolled destruction of important mangrove belts for illegal, intense shrimp aquaculture greatly lowers the coastline's shock-absorbing ability (Chacraverti, 2022). Fisherwoman have few physical assets and no disaster recovery credit, making it difficult for them to rebuild after devastating climatic disasters, forcing them to rely even more on the exploitative dadon system (World SDF, 2022).

Life Underwater SDG 14

SDG 14 requires ocean, sea, and marine resource conservation and sustainable use for sustainable development. Intensive deep-sea trawling and hazardous, saline effluent discharge from *L. vannamei* shrimp farms directly contradict this purpose (Chacraverti, 2022). Industrial techniques destroy coastal biodiversity, deplete near-shore fish supplies, and disproportionately impact small-scale artisanal fishermen who use selective, environmentally sustainable traditional gears. The fisherwomen's 100% consensus to end intense prawn culture and outlaw commercial trawling is grassroots, informed endeavour to enforce SDG 14 (Nandy, 2014). However, macroeconomic officials prioritise export income over ecological viability, ignoring their opinions.

Conclusion and Policy Imperatives

Purba Medinipur and South 24 Parganas fisherwomen portray a significant, systemic dichotomy. Their unseen, robust backbone supports a multi-million-dollar coastal economy, but they are geographically isolated, economically exploited, and politically marginalised. Competing state and corporate priorities that favour intensive capitalisation, aggressive privatisation of the ecological commons, and rigid, centralised bureaucratic control over natural resources render the UN Sustainable Development Goals meant to uplift these demographics dormant.

Radical, intersectional policy initiatives are needed to awaken these dormant SDGs and help shift from an exploitative Blue Economy to Blue Justice:

Dismantling the Dadon System through Financial Inclusion: The state must urgently develop hyper-localized, collateral-free micro-credit facilities and robust cooperative banking institutions for small-scale fisherwomen's seasonal needs. SDG 1 cannot be achieved without ending the informal debt cycle.

Implementation of the Forest Rights Act (FRA): The Sundarban Biosphere Reserve must immediately and comprehensively apply the FRA to replace the harsh, corrupt, and extremely discriminatory BLC system. Recognising artisanal fishers' community forest rights will legitimise their indigenous livelihoods, end bureaucratic harassment, and qualify "tiger widows" for state welfare, debt relief, and financial compensation without the burden of impossible legal documentation.

Massive Post-Harvest Infrastructure Overhaul: SDG 8 requires the state to invest extensively in decentralised, grassroots post-harvest infrastructure to satisfy decent work standards. Upgrading traditional khati yards with clean solar dryers, hygienic sorting platforms, and modern, subsidised cold storage facilities and giving them to registered women's cooperatives will greatly improve their income and long-term occupational health.

Ecological Zoning and Aquaculture Regulation: To promptly stop the conversion of multi-crop agricultural land into intense, ecologically harmful prawn farms, Coastal Regulation Zone (CRZ) legislation must be strictly enforced. For true climate resilience, mangrove restoration and common-pool foraging grounds must be prioritised over aquaculture expansion (SDG 13).

Substantive Political Capacity Building in PRIs: Elected women representatives need focused, consistent, and highly specialised capacity-building programs to challenge institutionalised proxy-leadership in local governance. These must emphasise administrative law, computer literacy, and financial independence. To eventually transform descriptive gender representation into substantive, impregnable democratic power (SDG 5), rigorous safeguards to protect women representatives from intra-party abuse are needed.

West Bengal fisherwomen cannot be strengthened socioeconomically through passive assistance packages and shallow policy changes. It calls for structural redistribution of resource rights, coastal economic democratisation, and institutional recognition of their enormous political and ecological agency. The Sustainable Development Goals need such big systemic changes to really benefit marginalised people.

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