

FINAL REPORT

SURVEY RESEARCH ON STRUCTURAL DISCRIMINATION AND SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC EXCLUSION OF THE CHRISTIAN MINORITY 'MUKKUVAR' INDIGENOUS COMMUNITY, FOR ADVOCACY AND RESILIENCE BUILDING, IN KANYAKUMARI DISTRICT, TAMIL NADU STATE, INDIA.



Conducted by:

**Organization for Community Development (OCD),
Door No 15/292A, Inigo Nagar,
Kurumpanai-post,
Kanyakumari district- -629 251, Tamilnadu,
INDIA
[www. Ocdindia.org](http://www.Ocdindia.org)**

Funded by:

**Minority Rights Group International
54, Commercial Street,
London E1 6LT, UK**

A. BACKGROUND:

The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has to date resulted in 33,182,624 cases and 1,000,350 deaths worldwide. In India, the corresponding numbers are 6,041,638 and 94,971.¹ Growing reports highlight men and Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) cohorts as at higher risk of adverse COVID-19 outcomes^{2,3}. Several genetic reasons have been proposed as potential explanations for the differential pattern of disease severity. Furthermore, disparities in socio-economic standards, housing conditions, socialization habits and risk perception have potential implications for risk of exposure and transmission. More importantly, “Time and time again, when emergencies occur, minorities and indigenous peoples are at risk of being excluded from life-saving humanitarian interventions. The current COVID-19 pandemic is no different and it is our moral obligation to ensure national responses leave no one behind.”⁴

The minority community covered in the present study is the ‘Mukkuvar’ indigenous fisher folk community in Kanyakumari district, Tamil Nadu, India. This community of marine fisher people professing Catholic religion is living in Kanyakumari district [in Tamil Nadu state] and Thiruvananthapuram district [in Kerala state]. They were one of the earliest communities to get converted to Catholicism by the Portuguese in the 16th century. The community is socially and economically backward and has been categorized as a Most Backward Community (MBC) by the Government of India. At present, the total number of Mukkuvar people living in the coast of Kanyakumari in 44 villages is 148,539, living as 37,211 families.

The objectives of the study include, but are not limited to the below.

- To examine the exclusion and discrimination faced by the minority indigenous Mukkuvar marine fisher folk community in the administration’s response and relief mechanisms to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- To assess the impacts on the community during the lockdown period due to their minority status, both as processes and outcomes, and document the findings.

- To assess the extent and effects of hate-speech and disinformation efforts aimed at the Christian minority Mukkuvar community during the present pandemic crisis.

It was felt that understanding these factors and their significance was urgently needed to achieve the following objectives.

- To advocate for non-discrimination and greater inclusion of the Christian minority Mukkuvar community in particular and all minority groups in general, making use of the data source generated.
- To gather data on the preventive measures adopted and to track the spread of the COVID-19 infection in the community.
- To assess the unmet needs and the needs that emerge out of the present crisis of the community and the most vulnerable sub-groups such as head-load fish vending women, widows and children, and to use this data to design projects that would meet these needs and would build the foundation for promoting social policy measures which extend beyond simply meeting basic needs.

A.1. SETTING AND STUDY POPULATION

There are a total of 44 coastal villages inhabited by the Mukkuvar minority community in Kanyakumari district. From these, 20 villages were chosen, selecting alternate villages as far as possible. In each village, 10 respondents were chosen based on criteria to include respondents from varied backgrounds which form 4 clusters. Therefore, the total sample size was 200.

Cluster 'A' – Fishermen

- Male
- Actively engaged in fishing, either as a fisherman working for wages, or as a boat-owner cum fisherman.
- Aged 26 to 55
- Varied Education Levels

Cluster 'B' – Head Load Fish Vendors

- Female
- Actively engaged in 'head load' fish vending, wherein the woman, due to economic compulsion carries a load of fish on her head to be sold in towns or at markets
- Aged 26 to 55
- Varied Education Levels

Cluster 'C' – Housewives

- Female
- Homemakers, not engaged in any income generation activity
- Aged 26 to 55
- Varied Education Levels

Cluster 'D' – Educated Youth

- Male or Female
- A minimum of high school education
- Employed or unemployed
- Aged 18 to 30

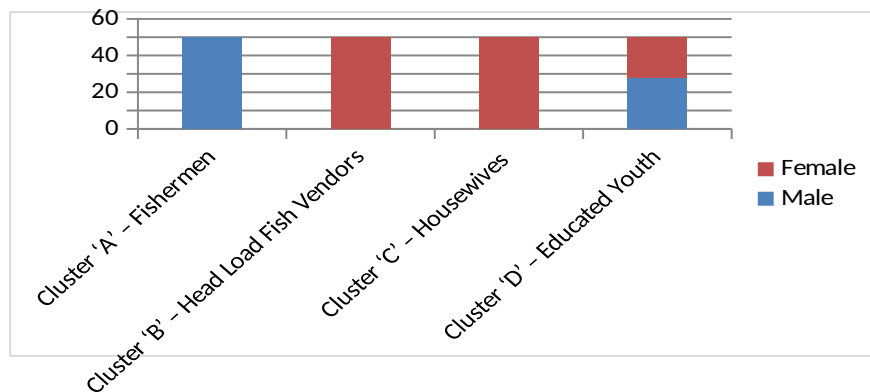


Figure -1: Sex-wise composition of Participant Clusters

A.2. SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRE & INTERVIEWS:

The questionnaire contained a total of 38 questions under 4 categories

- A. Personal / Family Information – 4 Questions
- B. General Information on Impact of Covid-19 – 3 Questions
- C. Information on Structural Discrimination and Social / Economic Exclusion – 21 Questions
- D. COVID-19 Related Discrimination Faced By Community - 10 questions

Interviewers were 5 educated young women from the same community who received 3 days training on interviewing and recording responses.

B. SURVEY RESEARCH FINDINGS

B.1. POPULATION CHARACTERISTICS

B.1.1. Housing and Ownership

The survey results established a baseline of housing type and ownership. The Cluster 'B', comprised of Women Head Load Fish Vendors are seen to be the most disadvantaged in the sector of housing. Only 45 % of the cluster has access to proper housing, as huts and tiled roofed buildings do not provide adequate shelter in coastal areas prone to high velocity winds and harsh rainfall. Likewise, the same cluster fared poorly in the area of ownership with only 60 % being owners. The Cluster 'C', comprised of Housewives has the same percentage of 60% ownership, but 96 % live in proper concrete houses. Active fishermen on the other hand score more than 80% in the areas of both access to proper housing and in ownership. The educated youth too score more than 80% in the areas of both access to proper housing and in ownership revealing a direct link between comfortable housing and education.

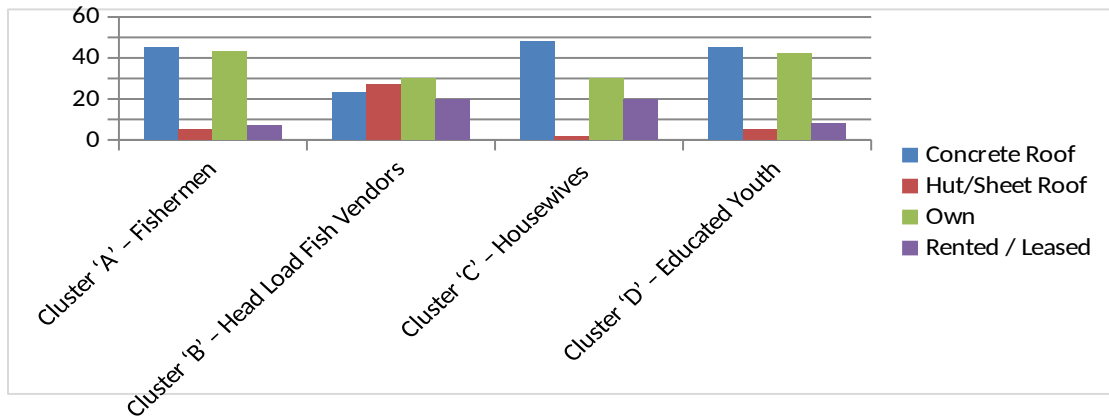


Figure -2 : Housing Type and Ownership of Participant Clusters

B.1.2. Household Income

Poverty, either at household level or at community level has been linked to exclusion at community or in larger society, leading to deferential treatment to the richer segments.

Head-load fish vending women are the only cluster who have households not able to earn even INR 500 a month. It is noteworthy that none of them earn more than INR 1500 per month. On the other hand, 30 % of housewives reveal monthly household incomes in excess of INR 1500 per month.

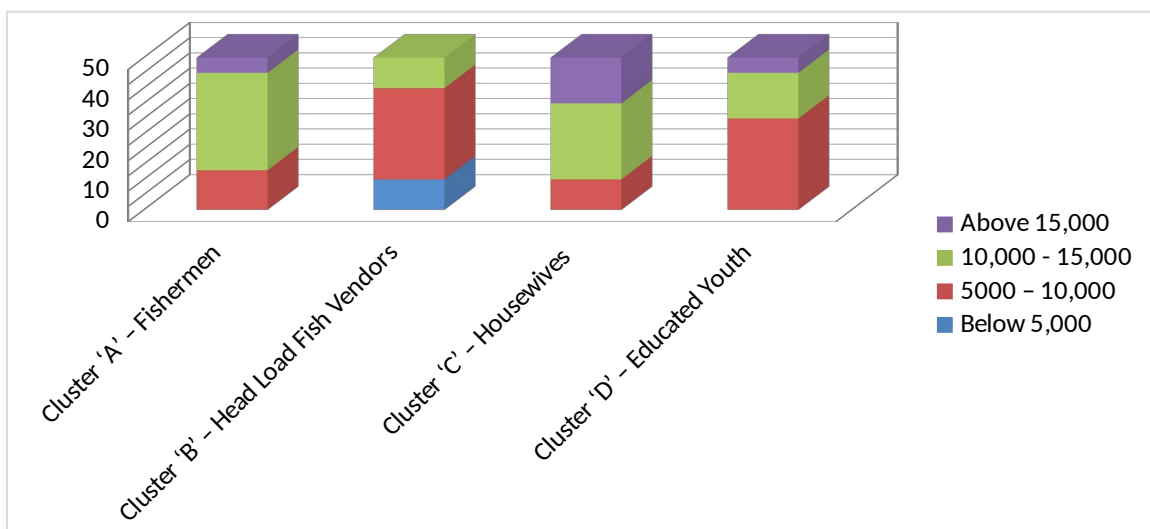


Figure -3 : Monthly Household Income (INR) of Participant Clusters

B.2. Impact of COVID-19 on General Life of the Community

Overall impact of the COVID-19 pandemic was reported by all four clusters to be 'Very Great' or 'Great'. There nevertheless was variation in the perception of the extent of impact. The clusters of Fishermen and Women Head Load Fish Vendors were more likely to describe the impact as 'Very Great'. Though the impact was felt by all family members, members of these clusters as the breadwinners of their families and responsible for other family members, felt the impact the greatest.

The community in general is totally dependent on the fishing industry. The lockdown necessitated cessation of all fishing activity for four months which was immediately followed by the annual two month ban on fishing due to the fish breeding season. The average loss of income was reported by the respondents as below

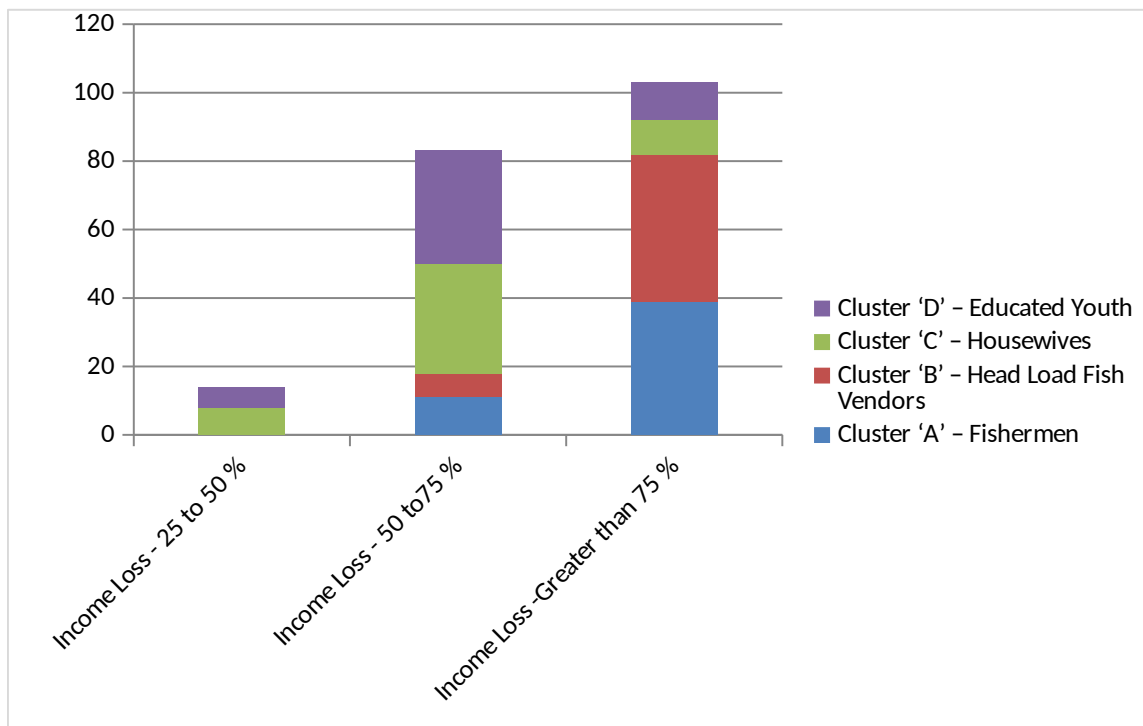


Figure - 4 : Loss of Income (INR) of Participant Clusters during COVID-19 Pandemic

C. STRUCTURAL DISCRIMINATION AND SOCIAL / ECONOMIC EXCLUSION FACED BY COMMUNITY IN GENERAL

It is necessary to have a clear understanding of the discrimination and exclusions faced by the community normally to perceive how the corona pandemic has augmented the situation. Discrimination and exclusion is faced by members of the community due to two facets of their identify. One is their caste, namely 'Mukkuvar' which belongs to the 'Most Backward Community, coupled with their occupation which is perceived as unclean and the other is their minority Christian religious identity.

C.1. Awareness and Satisfaction Levels Regarding their Identity:

The knowledge of different clusters of details related to their identity was assessed using the following indicators

- Knowledge of details regarding their caste classification by the Government
- Satisfaction or dissatisfaction regarding the above classification
- Knowledge of details regarding mass conversion of the community to Christianity
- Satisfaction or dissatisfaction regarding their identity as minority Christians

This exercise revealed that the fishermen and the educated youth are moderately aware of details regarding the formation of their identity. Only 10 % of each cluster reported clear knowledge of the details. The head load fish vending women showed the least knowledge with the housewives evincing the least interest in this aspect of their identity. Satisfaction with their identity was greatest amongst the fishermen, who for the majority take pride in their identity. Levels of dissatisfaction regarding the caste classification are greatest among the educated youth, with 50% showing dissatisfaction.

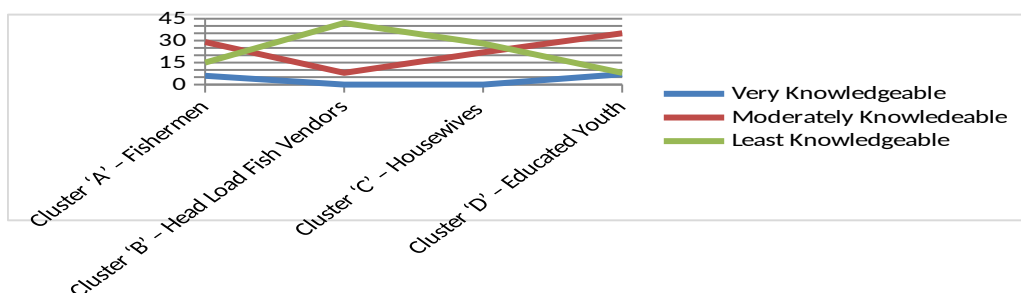


Figure - 5 : Knowledge on Aspects of their Minority Community

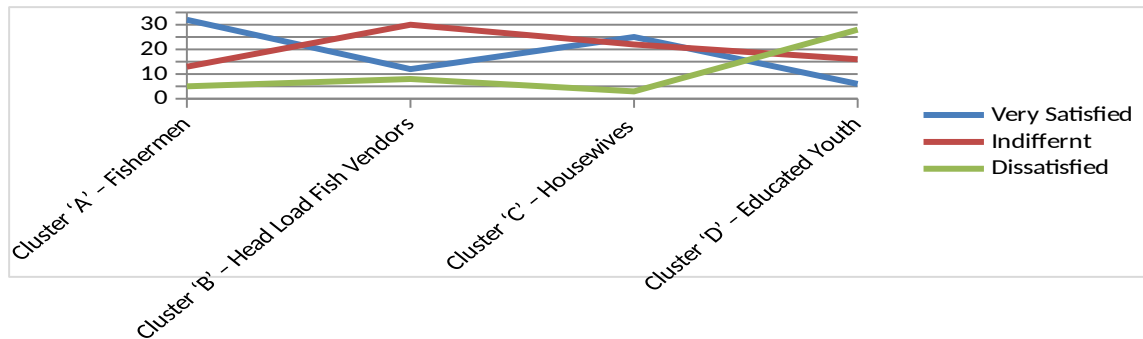


Figure - 6 : Levels of Satisfaction regarding their Identity

C.2. Discrimination and Exclusions Faced

Discrimination and exclusions faced by the different clusters due to their caste and minority religious status were assessed separately as perpetrated by different groups.

- Government / Bank Officials
- Members of other religions and denominations
- People on Social Media
- People operating / using public services such as transport

The results show that experiences of discrimination and exclusion occur based on their 'inferior' caste, occupation and their religious identity. The number and intensity of such experiences is directly proportional to the contact the respondents had with the perpetrators. Thus, the highest reporting of discrimination was reported by head load fish vending women.

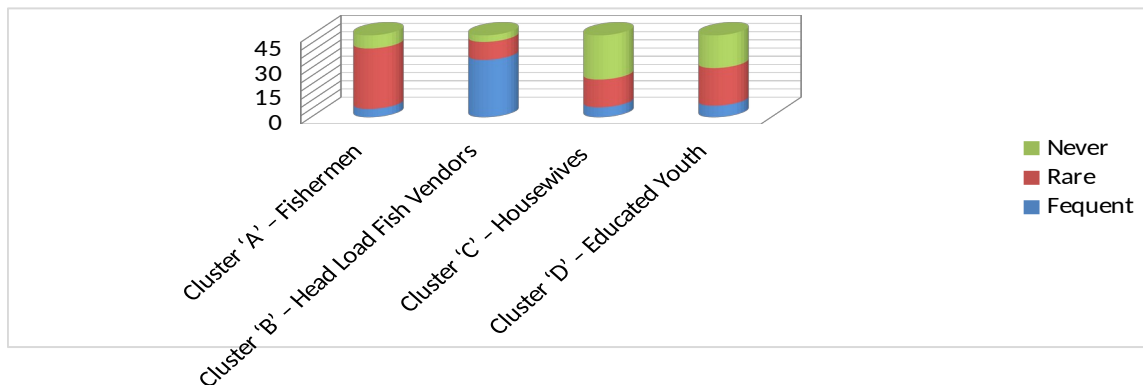


Figure - 7: Discrimination and Exclusion Faced Based on Identity Cluster-wise

C.3. Discrimination and Abuse on Social Media:

Throughout all the clusters, of those using social media (60% of total respondents) 80 % reported discrimination and abuse based on their identity. Moreover, 80 % of their interaction on social media is restricted to members of their own community.

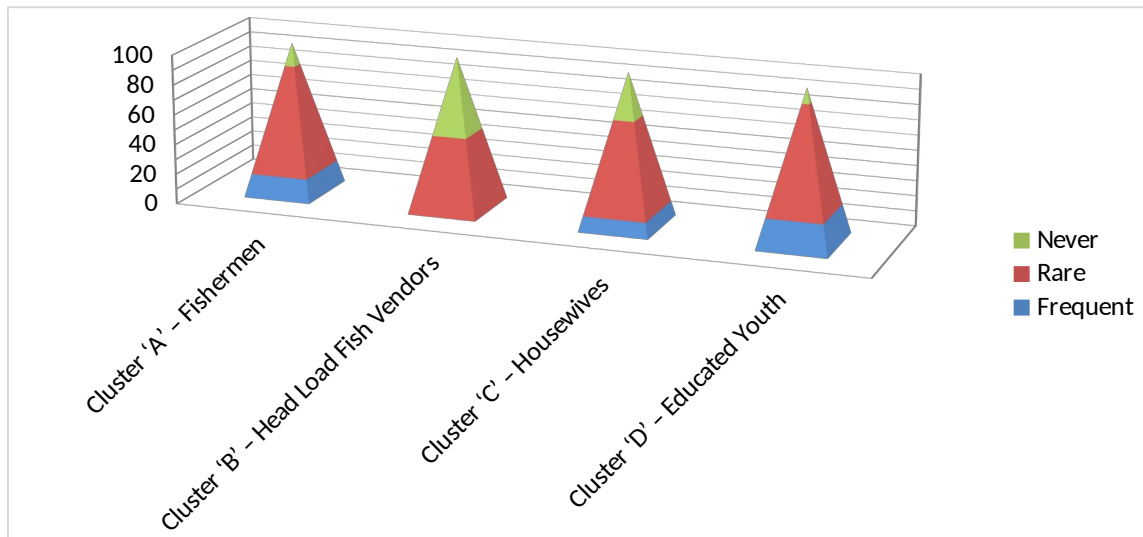


Figure - 8 : Discrimination and Abuse on Social Media – Cluster wise (percentage of respondents active)

C.4. Treatment of Women of Community by Government Officials and other Communities

On this important issue, it was surprising that many respondents could not form an opinion. Even more surprising was that exactly half of the educated youth had no opinion. Overall, 49 % expressed satisfaction on the treatment of women, 31% had no opinion and only 20 % expressed dissatisfaction. The fishermen's cluster was similar to the women fish vendor's cluster in expressing dissatisfaction which was done by 25 %. This sensitivity by the men is laudable. But overall, the lack of sensitivity, especially by educated youth shows a lack of awareness of women's rights and reveals that youth need to be sensitized on women's issues.

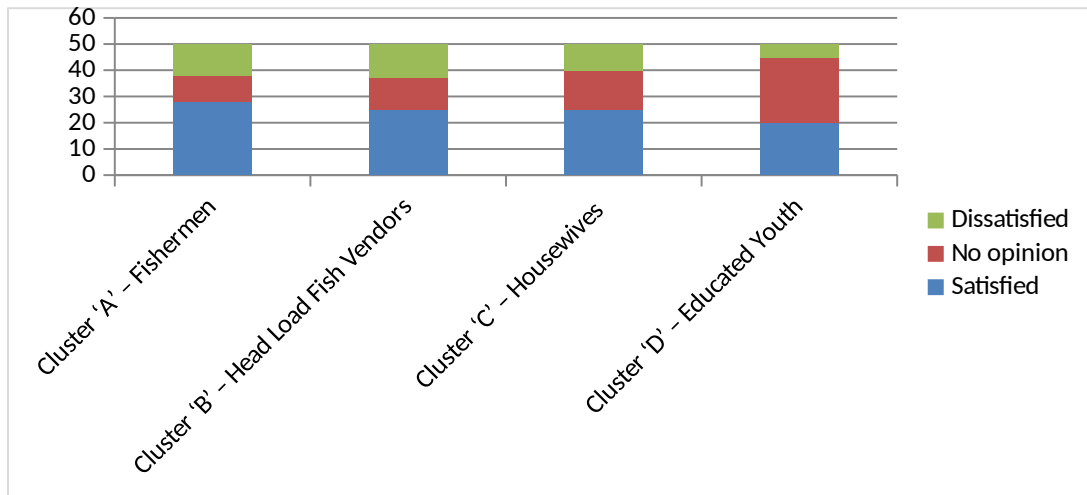


Figure - 9 : Treatment of women of Community by Government Officials and other Communities – Cluster wise

C.5. Education and Health Facilities

The four clusters had varied response regarding discrimination in education and health-care facilities.

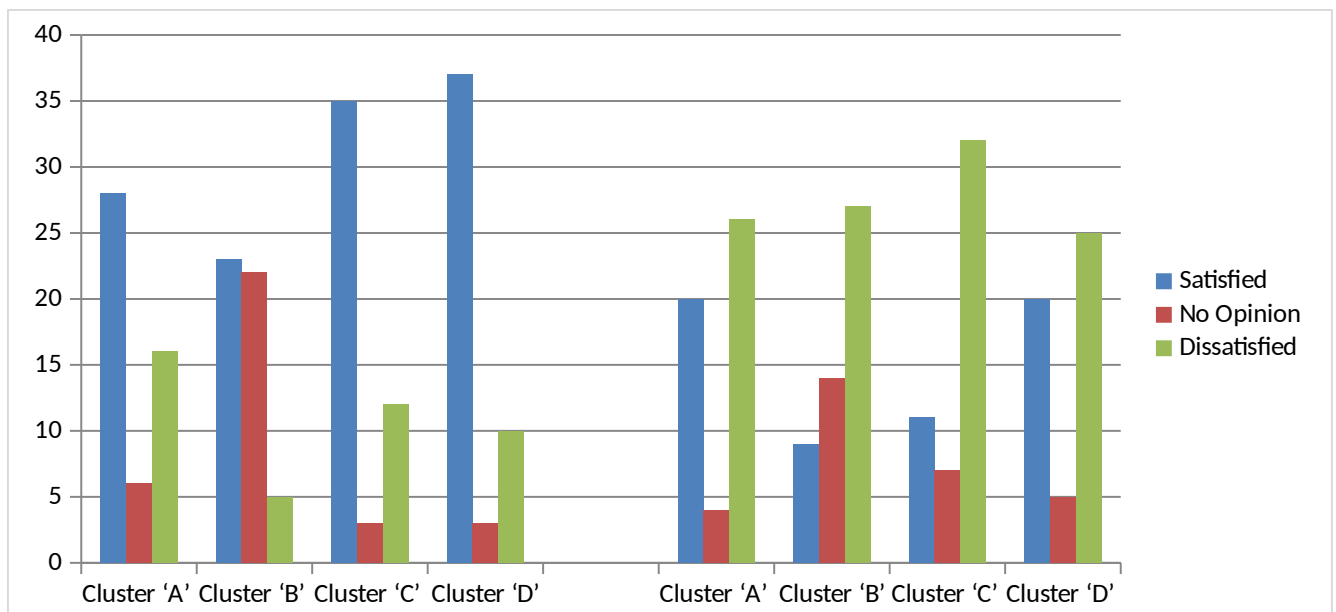


Figure - 10: Education Facilities and Public Health-Care Facilities – Cluster wise

More than twice the amount of satisfaction was evinced on the education facilities (65%) than regarding the public health care system (30%). It was heartening to note that the educated youth for the majority showed satisfaction over the education facilities

available to the community. The main reason for this must be that for those who close to get educated, affordable educational institutions are run by the Roman Catholic Church with access to all belonging to the community.

On the other hand, the dissatisfaction with public health care system (55%) stems from the distrust formed over a period of time on the system, and the lack of access due to which many have to take recourse to private medical practitioners.

D. COVID-19 RELATED DISCRIMINATION FACED BY COMMUNITY

D.1. Level of Satisfaction with the Government's Response

Satisfaction with the Government's measures during the COVID-19 related lock-down period was assessed based on the following

- Whether Government's awareness measures sufficiently reached the community
- Whether Government's response to COVID-19 pandemic was overall sufficient and satisfactory
- Whether the extended lock-down period was justifiable with regard to their community
- Sufficiency of relief measures during the lock-down.

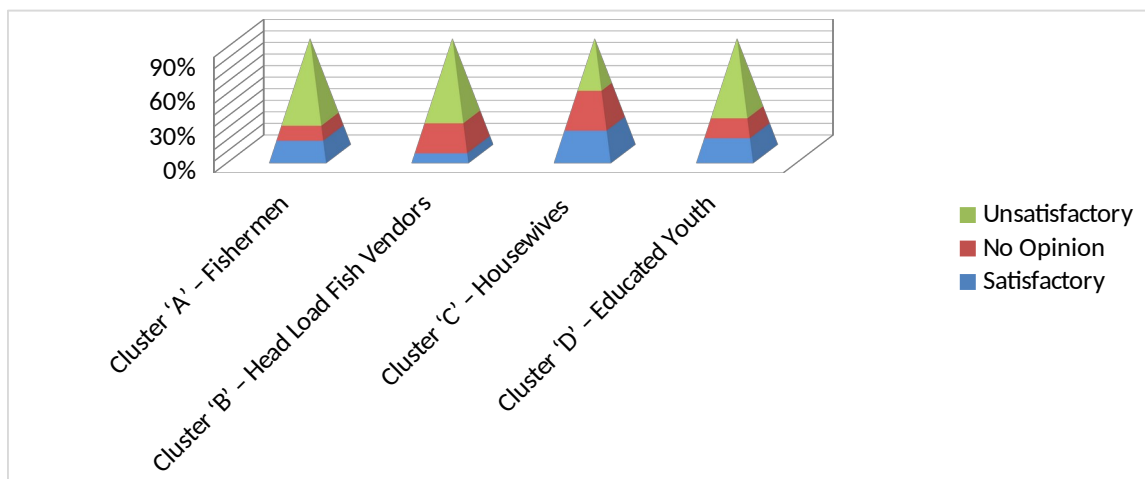


Figure - 11: Satisfaction with the Government's measures during the COVID-19 related Lockdown Period

Overall, 61 % of respondents revealed that the Government's response and measures were unsatisfactory in their opinion. 21 % chose not to express an opinion and 18% said that they felt that the overall response of the Government was satisfactory. That 21 % of respondents chose not to express an opinion is a cause for concern.

Regarding whether their community was discriminated against while implementation of the relief measures took place, 70 % said that definitely discrimination had taken place and that their community had not received what was due to them while other communities had benefitted. This opinion is partly because, the villages being homogenous and being isolated from other communities and travel having been suspended during the lockdown, the members had no means to ascertain what the other communities had in reality received. The fact remains that relief measures that were announced over the media were not implemented as announced, and this is a reason for their feeling of having been discriminated against. On the other hand, discrimination does occur as politicians tend to favour communities that are vote banks for them. This community tends to vote for parties who are pro-minority in nature.

D.2. Functioning of Local Administrators / Government Officials during the Lockdown

In spite of the severe problems the community faced during the lock-down period, only 15 % of the respondents report that either they themselves or a member of their family had approached an administrator or official regarding their needs and problems. It is heartening to know that 5 % had made more than 4 such visits. But, 75 % of those that did visit a person in authority report dissatisfaction with the visits. 60% of them feel that they were discriminated against due to their minority status.

D.3. Shortage Of Public Medical Care For Non-COVID Related Sickness

Majority of the respondents report that there was difficulty in accessing medical care for non-Covid related sickness during the pandemic. In this regard, 70 % of respondents reported non-accessibility of care for other health problems, 15 % had no opinion and only 10 % said that sufficient care was available for non-COVID related health issues.

D.4. Discrimination/ Abuse by Other Community Members

The lock-down reduced interaction with other communities and increased the dependence on the Government's administrative system. Having examined the community's experiences and the Governmental inclusion or exclusion as perceived by the community, the study also looked at the discrimination that occurred during the interaction with other communities, which though on a reduced scale, was still present.

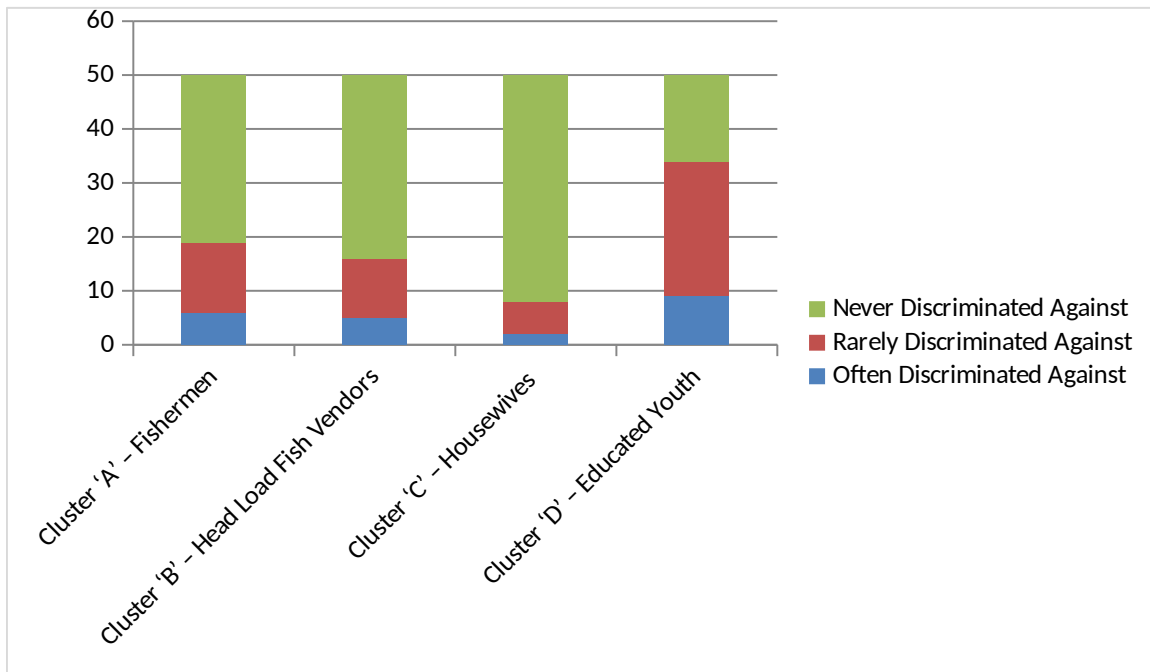


Figure - 12: Discrimination and Abuse by Other Communities during the COVID-19 related Lockdown Period

The incidence of discrimination and abuse has been directly proportional to the volume of interaction with other communities. The educated youth, being more active on social media have experienced discrimination or abuse based on their identity. 62% of this cluster report discrimination or abuse. Likewise, fishermen and head load fish vending women, having contacts with other communities, report 38% and 32% incidence of discrimination/abuse due to their identity. On the other hand, housewives, being relatively sheltered, in 84% cases report that no discrimination /abuse was perpetrated by members of other communities.

E. FUNDING STATEMENT

This survey research was undertaken with the support of **Minority Right Group International** who supported the initiative through their **South Asia Collective COVID-19 Support Grants**.

F. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Credit is due to the Fisherwomen Head-load Vendors' Federation (FHVF) for facilitating the interviews with respondents and deputing its members to accompany the interviewers.

G. REFERENCES

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