

# GENDER AND SMALL-SCALE FISHERIES IN AFRICA

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Fisheries – and small-scale fisheries in particular – contribute significantly to economic and food security in Africa. Women play an important role along the fisheries value chain and in fishing communities. However, their contributions often go unrecognised and therefore unconsidered. Women in small-scale fisheries also face specific challenges. They frequently encounter cultural proscriptions against taking on certain types of work and may lack control over their labour and incomes. Their work is often undervalued, and they commonly receive less pay for the same work. Family responsibilities may prevent them from taking full advantage of opportunities in the sector, and they tend to have limited decision-making power in fisheries governance institutions, communities and even their own households. This policy briefing details some of these challenges and outlines options for addressing them. It also identifies a number of opportunities for enhancing women's participation in the small-scale fisheries sector, including post-harvest activities (processing and marketing) and aquaculture.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1** Avoid 'one size fits all' solutions. Effective policies require a deep understanding of the historical, cultural, economic and environmental contexts affecting gender roles, relationships and dynamics.
- 2** Disaggregate data collected according to gender in order to surface the roles and responsibilities that women in fisheries and fishing communities fulfil (including their roles along the fisheries value chain), the resources they control, their remuneration, and work conditions. Data should be publicly available.
- 3** In interventions, aim to ensure that women in fisheries and fishing communities experience the progressive realisation of their human rights, in particular decent work and equitable remuneration, and facilitate livelihood diversification strategies that contribute to food security and income generation. Fish farming and aquaculture show particular promise.
- 4** Ensure that women are able to participate meaningfully and equitably in fisheries governance institutions and decision-making processes (including collective action groups).

## OVERVIEW OF SMALL-SCALE FISHERIES

Fishery and aquaculture activities are a source of livelihood for an estimated 155 million people worldwide. Most fishery activities in developing countries take place in the small-scale fisheries sector, which employs around 37 million people and has a direct bearing on the livelihoods and food security of approximately 357 million more.<sup>2</sup> Small-scale fisheries are a significant source of employment for poor rural populations, contributing more than 60% to total fisheries production, with almost all their catch for human consumption. In Africa, estimates on fisheries employment vary, with the total number relying on fisheries for their primary livelihood estimated at anywhere from 10 to 19 million, with another 90 million depending on fishing in diversified livelihood strategies. An estimated 200 million Africans rely on fish as a cheap source of protein, with small-scale fisheries providing the bulk of the supply.<sup>3</sup>

The fisheries value chain can be divided into harvest activities, post-harvest activities (including processing and marketing) and other activities associated with the sector (including equipment provision, repair and financing). Beyond their involvement in fisheries and related activities, people also hold roles in their communities that have a bearing on or are impacted by fishery activity. Similarly, at the household level, tasks affect and are affected by fishery activity.

## WOMEN IN FISHERIES

Women play an important role in fisheries. In Asia and West Africa, women represent 50% of inland fisheries' workforce, and respectively market 60% and 80% of all seafood.<sup>4</sup> Although women participate throughout the fisheries value chain, the bulk of their employment (around 96%, with variance by geographic region and type of fishery) consists of post-harvest activities such as processing and trading.<sup>5</sup> Roughly half of the 1.39% that fisheries contribute to Africa's gross domestic product is accounted for by post-harvest activities, indicating the importance of women's economic contribution in the sector.<sup>6</sup> Women are also active in fish farming and aquaculture. In addition, beyond direct participation, women are also involved in related activities: in Ghana, for instance, women frequently provide loans to male fishers and invest in boats or equipment.<sup>7</sup> Finally, women in fishing communities contribute to a range of broader social and economic services within households and the broader society.<sup>8</sup>

What is the rationale for taking a gender-centric view on fisheries? Despite the important role that women play in fisheries and fishing communities, their contributions are often rendered invisible or seen as an extension of domestic work, resulting in their exclusion from the discourse around fisheries. There is also a dearth of data on the roles and needs of women in fisheries and fishing communities, which may cause blind spots. For example, a 2017 study on fishing practices in Zanzibar<sup>9</sup> noted that seagrass harvesting, predominantly performed by women, was considered domestic work and therefore not included in official scrutiny of the sector. As a result, these resources were not addressed in management policy, with ramifications for environmental health and livelihoods, as well as the understanding of the role of humans in marine ecosystems.<sup>10</sup>

This failure to pay attention to the role women play means that policy interventions may miss the mark by misconstruing livelihood, food and nutritional security at the household and even community level, with ramifications for regional and national perceptions.<sup>11</sup> Where women's labour is 'invisible', loss of employment may go unrecognised, complicating economic understanding.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, approaches that do not examine gender's relation to wages, nutrition, equal treatment, abuse and so on will fail to materially improve human rights and livelihoods.<sup>13</sup> Lack of information also means that markets remain informal, without regulation or taxation.<sup>14</sup>

In addition, with some variation across cultures, women in fisheries generally tend to have fewer privileges and rights; less access to social and economic resources, including profitable markets and high-value fish (resulting in lower incomes); less of a voice in decision-making; and more domestic responsibilities than their male counterparts. When harvesting, men tend to be free to use the entire seascape, while women are frequently limited to land or shoreline activities, combining reproductive and household work with productive labour. Gender-related labour disparities are often reinforced by customs, norms, practices and even laws.<sup>15</sup> Women's unequal and unpaid burden of domestic and childcare work limits both their ability to accumulate capital and experience, and their opportunities to travel, network and access more profitable markets. Men generally earn more and fill most leadership and management roles, while women are more likely to occupy posts requiring minimum skills, with little job security and poor health

and safety conditions. Lower levels of literacy, access to knowledge and confidence may also result in women's contributions being less valued.<sup>16</sup> These factors result in differential and often intersecting vulnerabilities.

These challenges are compounded by other pressures facing the sector, including climate change, biodiversity loss, overfishing, changes in fishing tenure rights and laws, and the impact of industrial and agricultural practices. Women are often the first to be affected. For example, where women are taken up into new factories, their employment is often unofficial, without medical or social coverage, and as a result their livelihoods often become more precarious. Some researchers have also noted a relationship between changes in resource availability and sexual and gender-based violence, including transactional sex.<sup>17</sup> Changes in fisheries (whether as a result of changes in resource availability, climate change, policy or socio-economic upheaval) may also lead to migration, resulting in vulnerabilities as migrants lose contact with support networks.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR FISHERIES INTERVENTIONS

The FAO report *Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication* comes closest to a global consensus on small-scale fisheries governance.<sup>18</sup> Gender equality and equity, and the promotion of justice and fairness, are highlighted throughout the document, with one chapter devoted to these issues,<sup>19</sup> and most independent studies are in broad agreement with its recommendations.

Firstly, small-scale fisheries interventions should be based on a foundational understanding that there is no 'one size fits all' solution. A deep understanding of historical, cultural, economic and environmental contexts can provide insight into the gendered aspects of inheritance, public and private space, education, social expectations, work/community/household roles, power relations, tenure rights, and access to resources.<sup>20</sup> Western notions around gender and development may run counter to traditional views, and where the upliftment of women or the reform of traditional value systems is not done in a sensitive manner it may create conflict and lead to project failure.<sup>21</sup> Policymakers should also seek to understand the environmental, economic, technological and social factors that affect fishing communities. Projects that do not take community needs and priorities into account will often fail to garner interest or support.

Secondly, collecting gender-disaggregated data is a critical step. In particular, data on the roles and work that women fulfil in communities and fisheries, the assets and resources available to them (and how they are used), and their work conditions and remuneration, is critical in order to make effective gender-responsive policy interventions.<sup>22</sup> This data should be publicly available and updated timeously to monitor progress towards intervention objectives.

Thirdly, women's participation in collective action, self-help groups and other institutions is a key enabler of gender equity and the reform of oppressive norms and practices. Institutional capacity and staffing should be built in a gender-equitable and sensitive manner, whether at community, non-governmental organisation or government level.<sup>23</sup> Strengthened institutional capacity also tends to have a significant impact on creating sustainable community livelihoods. Women's meaningful participation should be enabled by, for example, ensuring that events take place at convenient times and locations, that women are represented in sufficient numbers, that their rights and voices are acknowledged as equal, that they occupy decision-making positions, and that they develop their own indicators of progress.

Fourthly, interventions should aim to ensure that women experience the progressive realisation of their human rights, in particular as these pertain to fisheries, both in the workplace (especially in terms of decent work and equitable remuneration) and beyond, in the community and household. This requires monitoring conditions and ensuring compliance. Women's representation by unions or community groups should be facilitated, and dispute resolution mechanisms (including traditional systems) should be established and/or reformed. Women's contributions to the fisheries value chain should be recognised as valuable labour, and care should be taken to ensure that policy interventions address post-harvest sections of the value chain.

Lastly, interventions that assist women in livelihood diversification (whether food or income) should be encouraged. Aquaculture techniques, for example, have met with particular success, especially since they can be carried out close to home and require little capital investment. Introducing novel technologies and methods in the community often means that they will not have become socially or culturally allocated to a particular gender, with the result that women may face fewer social restrictions on using them.

## CONCLUSION

Women play a vital role in fisheries around the world and in Africa. However, they also face a variety of challenges and discriminatory practices. This is compounded by a lack of comprehensive data on their work, with the result that interventions that seek to improve conditions in fisheries may miss the mark, or further entrench inequalities. Policymakers seeking to improve matters should ensure that they have a thorough contextual understanding of specific fisheries and fishing communities (aided by the collection of gender-disaggregated data), uphold the meaningful participation of women in governance and decision-making structures, aim to improve the realisation of women's human rights (in particular decent work and equitable pay), and assist in livelihood diversification.

## ENDNOTES

- 1 Mari-Lise du Preez is a former Researcher and Programme Manager at SAIIA's Governance of Africa's Resources Programme.
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- 3 AUC (AU Commission) & NEPAD (New Partnership for Africa's Development), *The Policy Framework and Reform Strategy for Fisheries and Aquaculture in Africa*. Addis Ababa: AUC & NPCA (NEPAD Planning and Coordinating Agency), 2014, pp. 17–18; NPCA & AU-IBAR (AU Inter-African Bureau for Animal Resources), 'The Pan-African Fisheries and Aquaculture Policy Framework and Reform Strategy: Gender and Youth in Fisheries and Aquaculture', Policy Brief, 11. Midrand: NPCA & AU-IBAR, 2016, pp. 6–9.
- 4 GIZ, *op. cit.*
- 5 AUC-NEPAD, *op. cit.*
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- 16 World Bank, *op. cit.*, pp. 561, 570.
- 17 Kleiber D *et al.*, *op. cit.*, pp. 743–744; NPCA & AU-IBAR, *op. cit.*, p. 8.
- 18 FAO, *Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication – At a Glance*. Rome: FAO, 2015.
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- 23 Alonso-Población E & SV Siar, 'Women's Participation and Leadership in Fisherfolk Organizations and Collective Action in Fisheries', FAO Fisheries and Aquaculture Circular, 1159. Rome: FAO, 2018; World Bank, *op. cit.*, p. 586.

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