

FISHERWOMEN'S STRUGGLE FOR THEIR RIGHT TO FOOD AND NUTRITION: CHALLENGES AND COPING STRATEGIES OF FISHER WOMEN IN UGANDA AND MALAWI

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THE SITUATION OF WOMEN SMALL-SCALE FISHERS IN AFRICA

In Africa, [10 to 19 million people rely directly on fisheries for their livelihood and another 90 million benefit from fisheries](#) more broadly. Although hardly recognized, across the continent, women play a critical role in the fisheries value chain. While a few women now own fishing boats and are directly involved in direct fishing, 96% of women’s work in small scale fisheries still takes place in [post-harvest activities, e.g. the processing, sun drying, smoking, and trading of fish](#). In addition to their role in small-scale fisheries, women are culturally still expected to be responsible for a broad range of roles and duties that fulfill social and economic obligations within the household, as well as in their respective communities. A few examples of these expectations include, but are not limited to, care and reproductive work, such as the care of children, the elderly and the sick, household chores, and procuring food to cook for their households.

Despite the extensive engagement of women in the fishing value chain as well as in other socio-cultural gender roles, they are often sidelined. [Women fishers are not given proper attention, and are left out of decision-making processes](#). Women and their needs are excluded from policy debates on fisheries, often leading to their marginalization. It is important to note, however, that women fishers have unique knowledge, experiences and aspirations for sustaining their livelihoods. Recognizing and addressing these gender inequalities, as well as applying a human-rights based approach to the core challenges and structural injustices faced by women small scale fishers is indispensable for the realization of the human right to adequate food and nutrition (RtFN) of fisher communities, particularly women.

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Criminalization of Fishers and its Impact on Women

In Uganda, a presidential directive, which was passed in 2017 to [let the army intervene and take control of fisheries along the shorelines of Uganda's major fishing lake](#), has worsened the situation of fishers. This directive has had and is still having a strong impact on fishing communities, especially women. It has led to cases of criminalization of fishers, with social implications. For example, at one landing site in Mukono district, the army confiscated a boat and fishing gear of a fisher woman under the pretext that she was not complying with the fisheries regulations. She then had to pay a 'ransom' of UGX 1.5 million (approximately USD \$ 400) for its release, but in the meantime, the boat was plundered of vital equipment. She was unable to resume her fishing activities – her primary source of livelihood – thus jeopardizing her and her family's RtFN.

There are also many instances of arrests of and charges against fishermen for using steel nets, which are classified as “illegal fishing methods” by the army. However, the cotton nets and fishing gear that are required by law are costly (approximately USD \$ 3,500), and are simply unaffordable for many fishers. On the other hand, steel nets are cheaper and readily available on the market despite being illegal, because the government continues to allow their import. Such arrests of fishermen further worsen the burden of the women who, in addition to their care activities, have to struggle to get arrested family members released.

More so, with increasing arrests and militarization of the lake, many fishermen attempt to run away from army arrests, and migrate from one landing site to a different one. There they establish new families, but abandon the women who they leave in former landing sites with hardly any options to migrate. Additionally, women have sadly revealed that in some cases of vulnerability, at times they have to fight for the little available fish by offering sex to boat owners and boat crew, lest they be forced to pay a much higher price for the fish that they need to sustain their livelihoods and feed their children. What is even worse is that women often have to put up with a lot of [gender-based violence, which particularly escalated during the COVID-19 outbreak](#) in various parts of the country.

Access to Land – Equally Important to Small-Scale Fishers

Beyond the challenges related to fisheries, women in fishing communities generally have limited access to land. The Ugandan Bureau for Statistics (UBOS) indicates that [only 38.7% of landowners are women](#). Moreover, 66.7% of land occupied by agricultural households falls [under customary tenure](#), which, albeit legitimate, is still [challenged when it comes to legal protection by the state](#). Although this is common across the country, the situation is worse among fishing communities because women have little access to land, which is much needed for their post-harvest fishing activities, such as the sun-drying of silver fish. Women in fishing communities also need land to grow food with which to feed their children, especially given their reduced access to fish. In addition to these practical problems on the ground, women are further marginalized due to the existing legal pluralism that lies behind the land tenure system, which applies both formal and informal laws, despite often being in conflict with each other.

Witchcraft Accusations and Witch-hunts

Women in fishing communities, like elsewhere in the country, are often engaged in informal relationships that are not recognized as legal marriages by the laws of

Uganda. The constant movement of men between landing sites as they search for fish and flee from the army increases the likelihood of informal family relationships. This makes women even more vulnerable and disadvantaged when it comes to marital property rights. The *Succession Act* that provides for inheritance is unjust from the outset, as it [defines different shares to be inherited based on sex, due to the still dominant patrilineal system in Uganda](#).

Another significant challenge that is almost exclusively faced by women small-scale fishers relates to witchcraft accusations against those women who are prospering. This assumption is made so as to be able to explain their success in a context where many live in misery and poverty. Such accusations have largely resulted in the eviction of these women from their own communities after being subjected on many occasions to physical violence and deprivation of their means of production, such as fishing boats. When the community perceives that someone practices witchcraft, they are believed to have the supernatural ability to perform acts of evil, including inflicting pain, sickness, misfortune and death. Poverty and lack of alternative livelihood opportunities in fishing communities have aggravated the practices of witch-hunting that commonly target successful women, especially those with thriving small businesses.

One case in point (during these COVID-19 times) is that of Teopista Komakech. Teopista is a fisherwoman who has lived at Buzindeere landing site for the last 20 years. She was rejected and evicted from her village, and the community retained all of her belongings. Community members used her boat and engine as collateral to raise money to hire the services of a witch doctor to cleanse the community of her suspected witchcraft practices. Teopista narrates that she initially borrowed money to procure a fishing boat, which enabled her to educate her 6 children (4 girls and 2 boys) thanks to her hard work. Meanwhile, many children in the community were dropping out of school. One of Teopista's accusers claims Teopista's witchcraft impregnated her daughter after completing primary school. Others claim that their children fell sick, whilst Teopista's children remained healthy because of her witchcraft. Since witchcraft accusations are often targeted at women, no one in the community accused Teopista's husband. On the contrary, community members always upheld his innocence. The example of Teopista is not an isolated case: Many fisherwomen in Uganda are subjected to the same treatment.

CHALLENGES FACED BY WOMEN IN SMALL-SCALE FISHERIES: MALAWI

Like in Uganda, fishing in Malawi is culturally considered to be a man's activity, and only men are expected to be directly involved in fishing. Even though some women may want to actively participate in fishing, they are hindered by cultural prescriptions and gender roles. As one woman from a fishing community in Ngara (northern part of Lake Malawi) explained: "a woman can have fishing equipment, but it is hard for her to take control, there are a lot of myths and beliefs against a woman actively participating in fishing. Even if you have a fishing gear, you always allow men to take control." Women gear owners also reported facing challenges when it comes to managing fishers who are always men.

Women Process Fish but Men Dominate Urban Markets

Based on the above, women in small-scale fisheries mostly engage in fish processing, and sell their produce on a market that is largely unregulated. Indeed, there is no formal market and standard price for fish. This unduly and disproportionately disadvantages processors and fishmongers who are predominantly women. Without information about the rapidly changing prices at the urban markets, fishers

(who are predominantly men) tend to charge higher prices for fish. At Nkhata Bay/Tukombo in Nkhata Bay and Ngara in Karonga, women fishers reported that people who come to buy *usipa* (a local fish) at the lake come from as far as Zambia. When the competition is high, *usipa* prices increase and squeeze margins for actors (women) further down the value chain. One woman fishmonger at Mzuzu Market lamented, “we make nothing out of our *usipa* because the prices are very high at the lake as we compete with buyers from Zambia who have higher purchasing power than us. Their currency, Zambian Kwacha, is stronger than our Malawian Kwacha”.

Another challenge relates to the problem of lack of or inadequate market infrastructure. Many women are unable to access stalls at urban markets. Though studies have shown that the majority of fish traders are women, the majority of fish retailers with a stall in urban markets across the country are men. Most women are forced to sell in inconvenient places such as up and down streets where they are not able to sell much. In addition to issues related to access to market stalls, another problem is access to storage space. Most urban fishmongers have no access to storage and are thus forced to sell their *usipa* upon arrival, even if the prices are low. Fishmongers at Mzuzu Market complained that if they do not sell all their *usipa* in one day, then they are forced to keep it out on the street, and it often gets stolen.

Additionally, the lack of access to capital is another bottleneck for women small-scale fishers. Loans are only accessible by those who are already better off, i.e. those who already have the fishing gear, which could be used as security. Many women who would like to actively participate in fishing are unable to because they cannot access loans, as they do not have collateral security. Fisher women lamented that some organizations started giving group loans, but it did not work out for women. The loans were dominated by powerful members. When there are challenges to repay back the loans, or there are no funds to service and repair the boats, those who are well off use their money and end up controlling the boat.

WOMEN SMALL-SCALE FISHERS CLAIMING THEIR RIGHTS AND RAISING THEIR VOICES

The examples from Uganda and Malawi show that, despite the great contribution of women to fisheries, a wide range of factors impacts their livelihoods. These include but are not limited to: the burden of care and reproductive work; prescribed gender roles manifested through cultural and societal difficulties and stereotypes; lack of access to land and to collateral; and structural barriers that hinder their full participation and impede their further contribution to small-scale fisheries. Despite this plethora of challenges, women in small-scale fisheries across Africa are not just passive victims. They fight on and continue to exercise their agency to influence their communities positively.

In Uganda, fisher women have taken the lead in mobilizing their communities to introduce human rights discussions amidst threats and intimidations from all corners. In Mukono district, fisher women have mobilized over 40 fishing communities for [human rights trainings](#) in 2021, conducted by [FIAN Uganda](#) in partnership with [Katosi Women Development Trust \(KWDT\)](#) and the [Network of Public Interest Lawyers \(NETPIL\)](#). Several trainings have continued to empower women and other members of the community with knowledge regarding their human rights and the role of the state as duty bearers in improving the living conditions in these communities. In the process, these women have mobilized and are demanding the realization of their human rights through, for example, writing

letters to their Members of Parliament (MPs) and leaders at various levels. Through their umbrella organization of KWDT, [women have acquired boats and fishing gear of acceptable sizes to carry out fishing together in groups](#), and thereby counteract the challenges of not being able to afford boats and fishing gear as individual women. Women have further braved up to meet their MPs to [express their views and positions about unfair bills](#).

In Malawi, women are not silent victims of systematic inequalities either. At Chilumba beach site in Karonga, women processors have mobilized and self-organized to form a group, which has put in place local regulatory and policy initiatives geared at increasing local participation. Particular attention has been placed on women's participation in *usipa* trade at the beach site where there is increasing but biased competition between men and women for access to *usipa* as processors and/or wholesalers. Through a new local regulatory and policy initiative, only locals are allowed to buy *usipa* directly from fishers as processors, and all other traders now have to buy *usipa* from local processors. With less competition from non-local traders, prices may be affordable for processors – most of whom are women – and may consequently lead to better margins. Women in small-scale fisheries are also mobilizing and organizing into village savings and loan associations – a form of microfinance to lessen the problem of access to capital.

Unless inequalities in the small-scale fisheries are tackled, the RtFN will not be a reality for women fishers and their households. A human rights-based approach is the very key to protect women against unfair customs and practices at the various levels. There is a great need for deliberate policies and programs that support women in small-scale fisheries to access resources and to overcome both structural and cultural barriers in order to effectively engage and contribute as agents.

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