

# Women are a mainstay of fishing in West Africa. But they get a raw deal

By Ifesinachi Okafor-Yarwood and Sayra van den Berg Bhagwandas

4 May 2021

Throughout West Africa, the [artisanal fishing sector](#) is [a crucial source of livelihoods and food security](#). For instance, in Nigeria artisanal fishing accounts for [80%](#) of the fish consumed and supports the livelihoods of [about](#) 24 million people.



Women make smoked fishes - locally called Okporoko - at Egede informal settlement in Port Harcourt, Nigeria. YASUYOSHI CHIBA/AFP via Getty Images

Both men and women work in the sector, though the labour – throughout the region – is divided by gender. Men [dominate](#) fishing and [production](#) while women dominate [post-harvest processing](#), such as dressing, sorting, salting and smoking the fish. Women also [do most](#) of the selling [and marketing](#). Women thus play a crucial role in artisanal fishing.

We have conducted research on marine resource governance across West Africa over the last six years. This has included field research in [Nigeria](#), [Ghana](#), [Côte d'Ivoire](#) and [Senegal](#). Our research has found that weak fisheries governance undermines the livelihoods of fisherfolk.

Research [elsewhere](#) shows that women in particular get a raw deal. Their contributions to the sector are widely un(der)paid, undervalued and largely [invisible](#). This [affects them in many ways](#) – for instance, they have less access to capital and other resources.

Because women don't earn enough money and are restricted in their roles within fisheries, they don't have the [buying power](#) to purchase enough fish to earn a living for long periods of time. They also don't have [access](#) to the required processing and storage facilities to avoid fish loss through spoilage.

At times of economic or social upheaval such as an epidemic ([Ebola](#)) or pandemic ([Covid-19](#)) their position is even more vulnerable.

We are now carrying out [research](#) that explores these vulnerabilities. The countries we're examining include Nigeria, Côte

d'Ivoire, Cameroon and São Tomé & Príncipe. In this ongoing research, we are looking at the extent to which Covid-19 has compounded the particular challenges that women face.

## The challenges

[Gender bias at institutional levels](#) – such as fishery ministries, management agencies and financial institutions – is a significant challenge for women in fisheries. Fisheries policy-making and management [overlooks the \(often informal\) contributions of women](#). Their fisheries contributions are treated as an extension of their everyday lives and responsibilities, rendering them [invisible within the blue economy](#).

This institutional invisibility reduces women's [access to capital](#), thereby restricting their ability to grow or diversify their livelihoods. Expanding fisheries livelihoods and diversification among women is further complicated by the fact that they must balance [productive and reproductive roles](#), and many use the majority of their [earnings to meet household expenses](#).

Post-harvest fish loss through [spoilage](#) is another enduring [challenge](#) for women processors. They typically [lack access](#) to adequate preservation and cold storage equipment, such as [wood for smoking](#) and [ice for storing](#), which both must be purchased and are subject to limited supply.

Depleting fish stocks pose another challenge to women. [Half of the fish species](#) in waters off West Africa are over-exploited. This reduces fish caught and [limits the access](#) that women have to fish for processing and sale. The competition for access to fish is growing and, as a result, there are reports of women exchanging [sexual favours](#) to guarantee steady fish supplies.

## Implications and next steps

The challenges that women in West African fisheries face have dire implications.

Institutional invisibility means they are marginalised. They're often excluded from receiving policy or [financial support](#).

Post-harvest fish losses through spoilage and depleting fish stocks threaten the economic and food security of [women in fisheries](#) and their families.

Reduced access to fish increases competition for this valuable resource, with dangerous consequences. Globally, HIV/AIDS infection rates in fishing communities are between [4 and 14 times higher](#) than national averages, with [transactional sex](#) in the fisheries sector contributing to this high prevalence.

## Way forward

Through our work, we've seen that women in fisheries do have coping mechanisms in the form of women's cooperatives. Women's cooperatives at national and regional levels provide important ["safety nets"](#) for women in fisheries, through financial support, advocacy and fundraising. In Côte d'Ivoire, women's cooperatives, like [L'Union des Sociétés Coopératives des Femmes de la Pêche et Assimilées de Côte d'Ivoire](#), offer support by regulating informal lending relationships on behalf of women who are otherwise exploited by loan sharks.

But more needs to be done, particularly as Covid-19 restrictions are making it harder for women to access, store and sell fish stocks – something we are seeing through our ongoing research.

Measures that policymakers should take include improved cold storage for fish preservation, and processing infrastructures – such as ovens and chamber freezers – to extend the shelf life of landed fish.

Furthermore, West African governments must consider establishing and supporting financial organisations – such as credit unions and cooperatives to provide credit at affordable rates – to lessen the burden of the financial risks that women encounter along the fisheries value chain.

This article is republished from [The Conversation](#) under a Creative Commons license. Read the [original article](#).

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ifesinachi Okafor-Yarwood is Lecturer, University of St Andrews.

Sayra van den Berg Bhagwandas is Postdoctoral researcher, University of St Andrews.

For more, visit: <https://www.bizcommunity.com>