

## Gender Division in the Fishing Communities of Lagos State Coastal Wetlands, Nigeria

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**Abstract:** For a very long time fishing has been erroneously thought to be mainly a male's world. Many studies on fisheries socio-economy have however, shown that women are a very active force behind the fishing industry. This study seeks to determine the role of women in fisheries and the facilities presently employed in their activities, which will be useful in improving fishery production in the fishing communities of the study area. Data used for this study are based on observation and informal discussions with women involved in fishing in the study area and random samples of informal interview with women in the fishing villages around (West) Badagry, Ojo, (Central) Ibeju-Lekki, Eti-Osa and (East) Ikorodu and Epe. Women are involved in all areas of the fishery sector, production, processing and post-harvest handling as well as marketing of fish and fish products. They are also involved in other activities such as financing of fishermen through loans and grants for procurement of fishing gears. They form a back bone for the artisanal fisheries of the study area. Strategies to help women in this crucial sector of the economy seek to promote the role of women as a contributor to society rather than a welfare cost.

**Key words:** Gender, coastal wetland, fishing communities, Lagos State

### INTRODUCTION

The fishing sector has sometimes been erroneously viewed as mainly a male domain. Development projects have over emphasized fish harvest, too often ignoring the associated activities-stocking for fishing voyage, gear, fish landing, processing and marketing-which have being carried out partly or mainly by women.

Although in some societies the management and production of fisheries and fisheries product is predominantly men's work, especially in countries predominantly dominated by Muslims, this is by no means the case in so many other societies.

Many studies, FAO (1986) Gnanadoss and Aderounmu (1982) and Hahn (1987) have shown that women are very active in the production, processing and post-harvest handling as well as marketing of fish and fish products. Unfortunately, however not much of these roles of women in fisheries have been accorded appreciation either in form of financial support or assistance by government and other development agencies.

FAO (1992) reported that the economically active population of Nigeria is 30.8 million, 10.3 million are women. Of the 13.3 million that are in agriculture, animal husbandry, forestry, fisheries and hunting, 25.7% of these numbers are women.

This study therefore seeks to determine the role of women in fisheries and the facilities presently employed in their fishing and other activities engage in by women in the study area.

### MATERIALS AND METHODS

**Study area:** Lagos State lies approximately between latitudes 6°22'N-6°42'N and longitudes 2°42'E-3°42'E. Thus the southern boundary of the state is formed by the 180 km<sup>2</sup> long Atlantic coastlines, while its northern and eastern boundaries are shared with the Republic of Benin. The Lagos 180 km<sup>2</sup> southern limits is adjacent to Nigeria's 30 nautical miles territorial sea water, within which absolute rights over all living resources are exercised. The two nautical miles of marine water immediate to the shoreline are the exclusive preserve of the small scale fisher folks. In addition, 22% (790 km<sup>2</sup>) of the 3580 km<sup>2</sup> surface area of Lagos State is covered by freshwater and brackish water, lagoons, extensive swamps and floodplains, which makes fishing one of the predominant occupations of the people of Lagos State. The study area is separated from the open sea by a set of sandy land which varies in width from about 2-16 km.

**Data collection:** Lagos State coastal wetland was divided into three based on geographic location: West, east and central. A desk review was carried out to collect information on the number and location of fishing communities in Lagos State. The information obtained was further substantiated at the Federal Department of Fisheries in Victoria Island and Lagos State Agricultural Development Agency office at Oko-Baba, Agege. Based on the information a reconnaissance survey of the Ibeju-Lekki Local Government area was conducted during which

a number of fisherwomen were interviewed. Preliminary interviews with the women demonstrated that the role of women in the fishing communities were better assessed by visits to the villages.

Data used for this study are based on observations and informal discussions with women involved in fishing related activities in the study area and informal interviews with randomly selected women in the fishing villages within the three zones in Lagos State coastal wetlands, over a period of 18 months July 2003 to December 2004. Viz: Badagry and Ojo in the west; Ibeju-Lekki and Eti-Osa in the central and Ikorodu and Epe in the east.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In the Coastal wetlands of Lagos State, the women predominates the processing and marketing of fish and fisheries product. Both men and women perform activities associated with fish harvest, preservation and marketing. The type and extent of this involvement varies from one area to the other. Among the fisher folks in the study area, women form over 40% (Table 1) the most common gender division of labour is in the activities carried out from shore and those carried out from boats some distance from shore. From the moment the boat lands the women tends to dominate activities. They empty the nets, sort the catch, clean and sell the catch on the shore. Some hawk the fish around villages and surrounding cities or at strategic locations. Women also handle all fish processing which is mainly smoking, with a little bit of salting and sun drying during the dry season. Fish is smoked according to the taste of customers, some fish are smoked lightly to soften and cook the fish but has high moisture content, with short shelf life, while some are smoked dried to about 5% moisture content with longer shelf life and hence attract higher price than the smoked ones. The women, mostly through smoking usually process unsold catch-of-the-day in the eastern and western part of the study area. The percentages of smoked fish to other processing methods were 89 and 92% for eastern and western part of the study area respectively, the central part is highly urbanized with high demand for fresh fish and hence smoking is hardly done for commercial purpose. However, some women begin smoking immediately after landing, this some say is as a result of special orders from customers or when targeting a particular market and sometimes when catch is high, they start smoking part of the catch immediately and when the men come in the middle of the night, the fish are smoked immediately to avoid spoilage and loss of catch. Aside satisfying specific request, other reasons adduced for opting for smoking as a means of preserving fish includes:

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of fisher folks in coastal wetlands of Lagos State

Socio-demographic characteristic	NOR*	Male	Female	(%)
Age class				
<20	20	6	14	4.49
21-30	48	29	19	10.79
31-40	129	73	56	28.99
41-50	164	76	88	36.85
51-60	76	55	21	17.09
>60	8	6	2	1.79
Total	445	245	200	100.00
Marital status				
Married	341	178	163	76.46
Single	105	63	42	23.54
Standard of living				
Poor	182	87	95	40.63
Average	203	136	67	45.31
Above average	63	39	24	14.66
Educational background formal (in years)				
5-Jan	231	125	106	51.45
10-Jun	116	68	48	25.83
11-15	22	14	8	4.90
Informal	80	46	34	17.82
No. of children				
1-4	104	44	60	38.50
>4	237	148	89	69.50

NOR\* = No. of positive Respondents

- Lack of adequate storage facilities
- Fluctuating electricity power supply when refrigerators or cold rooms are available
- Distance of landing site to the main markets, oluwo market in Epe, expressway in Ibeju-Lekki, Marina in Badagry and Olojo market in Ojo, where ready customers are always available.

An informal interview with one of the fisherwomen in Iberekodo in Ibeju-Lekki shows that her fixed assets include boat, net, smoking oven and two paddles. According to her 2 types of fish are common: *Alestes* and *Chrysichthys*. Most of her catch she said are sold fresh to retailer and during the peak season, some are smoked. She approximated a kg of these fishes to sell between N250 and N300. She realizes between N3000 and N5000 a week during peak periods and between N1000 and N2000 a week during slack periods if she goes fishing daily.

Yeketomeh, a village of about 25 km from Badagry has a population of about 750. Almost everybody in the village is Egun. Most of the fish landed in the village is preserved by smoking and then taken to Badagry town market during market days. Processing is done by fishermen's wives who buys the catch from their husbands or are in joint business with their husbands. They have no fixed earnings and bulk of their earnings is spent on household needs. This finding agrees with that Medina-Pizzali (1988) he discovered that, the wages of women that work with their kinsmen are not direct and it

**Table 2: Processing cost for 50 kg fish in coastal wetlands of Lagos State**

Item	Unit	Unit costs (N)	Total costs (N)
Fresh fish	50 kg	250.00 kg <sup>-1</sup>	12,500.00
Firewood	10 bundles	70 bundle <sup>-1</sup>	700.00
Labour	1 person	50 kg <sup>-1</sup>	2,500.00
Cartons	4	100	400.00
Total			16,100.00

is usually very small, which is in turn spent for the whole family including the husband. It also agrees with the findings of FAO (1992) that, when women have money, nutrition improves because they tend to spend their income on food for the family. In the central community, the supply sector on one hand and the processing and marketing sectors on the other are more or less separated. Thus women who engage in processing and marketing usually have their own budgets; they organize their business quite independently and are responsible for all expenses connected with their economic activities. One of such women said that when the demand for smoked fish is high she realizes a profit of about N1950-N2200 on a 50 kg fish. Also when fish is available in large quantity, she processes up to 150 kg week<sup>-1</sup>, which means that she can realize a profit of N5850-N6600 a week. Table 2 gives processing cost for 50 kg fish.

According to Medina-Pizzali (1988) marketing is the crux of the whole fisheries problem; it would be use equally futile to set up optimum standard of fish consumption, unless means can be found to move the fish from the landing site to the consumer at a price which represent a fair profit to the producer and is within the consumers ability to pay. Fish marketing in the study area is strenuous work; it begins by waiting at the landing sites until fishing boats arrives, bargaining for a batch of fish which is then carried sometimes on the head to hawk at markets, communities and other towns. Majority of the women dealing in the marketing of smoked fish are Yourba, they travel from village to village to buy smoked fish during market days.

A smoked fish trader interviewed at Badagry market revealed that she started trading 25 years ago with the capital her husband gave her (N250.00). She travels to Ogun State and Yelwa in Kebbi State on alternate weeks. She buys up to 50 cartons of smoked fish each trip. Each carton cost between N1450.00-N2750.00 depending on the prevailing market price and quality of fish species. She sells to retailers and makes a profit of between N150.00-N250.00/carton. Since she started the business she has built a 3 bedroom flat and contributed significant amount of money to the education of her four children.

Women also form finance and cooperative societies, especially those who undertake wholesale business, they are therefore able to finance fishermen by outfitting a needy fisherman with supply of fishing inputs such as

netting materials, engines and sometimes boat. By this, she thus commits the fisherman to her at a reduced price for his catch. She functions as a source of informal credit, providing necessary cash for the fisherman's family, especially during the extended seasonal periods of limited catch and income.

Women of low economic status on the other hand are often responsible for heavy tasks, such as going on motorized canoe on the high sea to purchase fish from fishing trawlers, smoking and processing unsold catch of the day.

Management and care of fish from industrial sector as is the case in the central part of the study area are the responsibilities of wealthy women and sometimes men who own their own cold rooms or serve as agent of fishing companies and act as their administrators. Administrators are either employed on the basis of their previous experience in frozen fish marketing or payment of deposits; these administrators receive commission on sales. The independent distributor on the other hand makes cash purchases. Unlike the administrator, she is under no obligation to buy fish from the parent firm when she thinks the parent firm's fish stock will not sell fast due to either the species available or cost. Both the administrator and independent agent are then responsible for getting fish across to the different customers.

Women dealing in fresh fish in the study area can be categorized into three. There are those dealing in the trade on a full time basis, with all facilities such as deep freezers/cold room, weighing scale, attendants and vehicle; those that hawk their goods around town; and the last who engage in the trade to supplement their income. The first category of the fish dealers invests large amount of money in the business because it is capital intensive.

An interview with one of the full time fresh/frozen fish trader revealed the following:

She has 8 deep freezers, costing N240,000.00 (not currently bought); 2 weighing scales N1500; a generator (N87,000.00) and a Liteace delivery van (N650,000.00). She supplies fish and shrimp to hoteliers, food vendors, prisons and individuals and retailers come to buy in her store. She is an independent dealer to 2 fishing companies, has 6 regular fishermen whom she outfitted and so sells their catch to her. On the average she makes a profit of N73,000.00 a month.

## CONCLUSION

Women have always been an important part of the work force in fisheries and their role will continue to grow with development, industrialization, economic necessity

and the expansion of women's access to the economy. As may be seen, an important gap exists between the role of women in fisheries in actual life and as it is reflected in development plans. Strategies to increase women's participation in development, therefore must seek to promote the role of women as a contribution to society rather than as welfare cost. One important key is to ensure that fisherwomen have access to credit or savings institutions so that they can finance their own ventures. Perhaps most crucial of all is to provide education and training literacy and general education are fundamental. Extension services are often geared toward and conducted by men, fisherwomen too need training in improve processing techniques; marketing methods and cottage industry skills, nutrition and child care. Training programs should involve women as trainers, because they then serve as models and incentives.

The woman is the heart of the family and the family is the corner stone of society, she is a powerhouse of creativity and development. The world is shared by both men and women, promoting more women's participation in the fisheries economy sector in the study area must not

be seen to deny anyone of their rightful due. In sum, while inclusion of women in the active labour force is improving, the need remains in this sector of the economy for data to reflect the realities of women's traditional employment in the different sector.

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