

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

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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.

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