

# WOMEN DO FISH: A CASE STUDY ON GENDER AND THE FISHING INDUSTRY IN SIERRA LEONE

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## Abstract

Sierra Leone is one of the few countries with comprehensive legislation on fisheries and a special Fisheries Division established under the Ministry of Trade and Industry. The focus of the legislation and the government agency is on the improvement and development of artisanal fisheries. The onset of the war in Sierra seriously affected artisanal fishing activities - fishermen were killed, maimed or driven away from their communities and women were forced to seek refuge in safer places.

In every fishing community, men, women and children have clearly defined activities to perform on a daily basis. Traditionally, and still in the main, men do the fishing itself while women play a supportive role. But women are now becoming more involved in diverse fishing activities ranging from processors/traders to boat owners.

Some women can spend many hours a day in fishing related activities for which they receive very little or no assistance from any agencies. In fish processing, for example, which is one of the most important roles women perform, very few women have the opportunity to upgrade their activities through training and improved technology. There are, however, some women who have become rich over the years in this "male-dominated" industry by owning either trawlers or motorized boats for fishing.

This paper looks at the varied situation of women in fisheries in Sierra Leone. As a conclusion, the paper proposes some measures for the improvement of women's contribution and status in this industry. Women's major concerns are better markets for their products and improved credit facilities to enhance their fishing-related activities.

## Historical Background of the Fishing Industry

Sierra Leone has a Continental Shelf area of 330 km from the Continental Shelf area of about 25,600 sq km. The width of the Northern shelf area is about 140 km and that of the Southern shelf area is about 132 km.

In 1959, the first comprehensive legislation affecting fisheries was passed-The Fisheries Ordinance 1957, and in 1958, a Fisheries Research and Development Unit was established under the Ministry of Trade and Industry. After Independence in 1961, a Fisheries Division established under the Ministry of Trade and Industry was transferred to the Ministry of Agriculture and Natural Resources, and its focus was on the improvement and development of artisanal fisheries. The year 1976 experienced the influx of foreign vessels operating in Sierra Leone's waters, and in 1988 a comprehensive Fisheries Policy Framework was formulated and passed into a Decree based on 3 documents:

- The Fisheries Management and Decree (1994)
- The Fisheries Regulation (1994)
- The Fish, Shellfish, Fishery Products Sanitary Regulations (1998)

The Inland Fisheries are found in the rivers, lakes, floods, plains and swamps with a total annual production of 15,000 t. The three major estuaries are the Sierra Leone, the Scarcies and Bonthe. The species of fish and shellfish found in these estuaries include mullets, catfish, tilapia, oysters, cowrie,

cockles, snappers, gwangwa etc. The main objective of Inland Fisheries is to promote socio-economic development in the rural areas. The development of this sub-sector is on a sustainable basis and is being given high priority by the Government of Sierra Leone, and there is a strong participation of women in fisheries development.

Artisanal or canoe fisheries comprises a variety of dugout and planked canoes distributed all along the coastline and the rivers. The motorized canoes are distributed all along the coastline and rivers. Between 1995 and 1998, artisanal fishery accounted for an average of about 73.4% of the total fisheries landings.

Fishers predominately catch herring and bonga, 70% of the total artisanal production, which contributes significantly to local fish consumption as none is exported.

In terms of industrial fisheries, there comprise a fishing fleet that includes demersal gears, shrimper and purse seiners (shellfish and fin-fish) operating under fishing companies. The Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Marine Resources ensures the proper monitoring, control and surveillance of this sub-sector and therefore keeps records of the various fish catch, fish exports and nationalities of fishing vessels operating in Sierra Leone and the Inshore Exclusion Zone (IEZ) reserved for canoes and recreational fisheries. This sub-sector, which constitutes a critical factor in the development of fisheries, engages around 25,000 fishermen. It is also this same sub-sector that engages women in various other fishing activities in their different communities.

## Activities of Men, Women and Children

In every fishing community, men, women and children have clearly defined activities to perform on a daily basis. The actual fishing operation is performed by men. They go out in their canoes with their various types of fishing gears. Other activities performed by men in their various fishing communities are boat building/repairs, and net (fishing gear) mending.

Besides the role of being housewives, women are now becoming more involved in diverse fishing activities ranging from processor/trader to boat owner. Traditionally, the physical harvest of fish is a man's job but as women are now getting more involved, some women occasionally resort to pre-harvest activities of net mending and repairs. In the post-harvest sector, their predominant role is in purchasing, processing and marketing. Women sometimes spend 8-10 hours per day in fishing related activities for which they receive very little or no assistance from NGOs or other organisations.

Men who do not make fishing trips use 6mm nylon fishing lines with hooks of various sizes ranging from nos.9-14 on which baits are inserted. The use of motorized boats has been popularized in spite of the high cost involved. At the end of each fishing trip, landed fresh fish catch are sold to female fishworkers who then market them either fresh or dried. In some cases, children accompany adult fishing crews. If the fish is sold dried, women and children jointly wash, remove the fins and enterons (in the case of some species), fetch firewood and do the drying on a processing banda, a platform of mud and sticks or metal 3 to 3.5 ft. high, on which the fish are laid. The sales of either the fresh catch or processed fish are carried out by both women and children.

In some cases, women fish in rivers, streams, creeks and small waterbodies using scooping nets, locally called beimbe. A fishing group usually comprises 3-5 women, each with a task to perform. One or two women will show the rest of the group where the river/stream/creek has a high population of fish, and will be the first to step into their new place of exploit. They will then start disturbing the water to locate the hiding places of the fishes. The one or two women holding the scoop net will then come closer to the first batch of women in readiness to receive the escaping fish.

This type of fishing normally takes place in the dry season between September and March. Ninety-nine per cent of fish catch by this method are for domestic consumption.

In fish processing, which is one of the most important roles women perform, very few women have the opportunity to upgrade their activities through training and improved technology. Despite the development of more fuel-efficient smoking ovens, most of those they use are still rudimentary and fuel-inefficient.

Women run the home and manage the family enterprises, and hence can influence business decisions. However, women have always expressed their major concerns as being the quests for better markets for their products and the lack of credit facilities to improve their activities. Children are not always directly involved in fishing activities within their communities. Children are catered for at birth, and this continues until school-going age. Families that can afford the cost of educating their children send them to primary and later to secondary schools in the bigger towns. However, for those children who cannot afford to go beyond primary education, the parents make sure that they get involved in their fishing activities.

For the male child, he is taught net-mending and repair skills, and he is expected to help fetch fuel wood for fish processing and so on. For the girl-child, she is always with her mother helping out with purchasing, processing and marketing of fish, and other household functions such as cooking.

## Impact of RUF War on Fishing

The onset of the war in Sierra Leone exacerbated poverty. This did not exclude women from the industry. About 80% of the coastal area, which favours artisanal fishing activities, was seriously affected. The men involved in the physical harvest of fish were killed, maimed or driven away from their communities. Those who were "fortunate" only lost their fishing gears and equipment. As a result, women were left with no alternative but to seek refuge in seemingly safer places. The attack on some of these communities resulted in damaged boats and fishing gears. This situation affected the quantity and quality of fish catch. As a result, some fish workers (fishermen, fish processors and mongers) migrated to other fishing communities that did not experience the long presence of RUF fighters. Those who stayed in RUF-held territories were subjected to all forms of harassment and intimidation. In addition, they were asked to provide both fresh and dried fish for the fighters, which considerably affected their normal subsistence. Women who sought refuge in bigger towns, like Freetown, Bo, Kenema and so on lived in Internally Displaced Persons Camps and their livelihood strategies included receiving handouts from Aid Agencies, carrying out petty trading activities, and getting assistance from relatives and friends.

## Women's Activities in Fishing Communities

Some women have become rich over the years in a "male-dominated" industry by owning either trawlers or motorized boats for fishing. The following are examples of women who are involved in Industrial Fishing that have created employment, and generated foreign exchange, household incomes, and high nutritional level:

### 1. Mrs. Lilian A. Lisk

Born to Mr. J. Collingwood-Williams (Sierra Leonean) and Elizabeth Konadu (Ghanaian) in August 14, 1946. She graduated from Fourah Bay College, University of Sierra Leone, with a B.A. General Degree. She served in the Civil Service of Sierra Leone in the Ministries of Agriculture, Natural Resources and Forestry, and Social Welfare. Later, she became Managing Director of Okey Agencies Ltd.; and Executive Director of Apex Fishing company. She has a food processing and parking company called Intrapex (SL) Ltd.; and she imports and distributes of various essential food items in Sierra Leone. In Ghana, she is Managing Director of Legon Fishing Co. Ltd. and Intrapex Ghana Ltd.

2. Mrs. Abie Aruna

Born 44 years ago, is married with four children and was a stenographer by profession. She was introduced into the private business by a friend before setting up her own business five years ago, called Monza Fishing Company, where she is Managing Director. She trades in tuna, which is seasonal. Mrs. Aruna is engaged in other businesses like the transport and restaurant businesses.

3. Mrs. Annie Joy Toure

Has served as agent for fishing boats and shrimpers and now owns a company called Annsenal Fishing Company with a fishing trawler that is locally registered. She has received technical assistance several times from the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Marine Resources.

There are other women who are doing very well in the "male-dominant" industry, but are in the artisanal sub-sector. When they were contacted at the Goderich Fishing Community, the following information was obtained from a few of them:

1. Mrs. Harfsatu Jalloh

She started as a Petty Trader, but later joined the Women's Group of AFOD that gave her a fishing boat on loan at a cost of 6.5 million leonanes (local currency). She has a seven-men crew and she has additional two motorized boats and is expecting to have a third one in September 2001.

2. Mrs. Nafisatu Sallah

This woman joined the fishing business 15 years ago with an old net and then joined a friend who had a boat. After two years, she was able to own a boat called MINAH BOAT and presently has two boats with a crew of nine men.

## Conclusion

Women's activities in the fishing communities should involve the following:

- The physical harvest of fish, that is, boat ownership
- Processing, marketing and distribution. This should include the handling of fish from the point of production to the consumer.
- Decision making, that is, with the indigenous pattern of social division of labour, women should make decisions and act to a large extent independently of their husbands. They should have separate budgets. Regardless of the complex situation depending on ethnic, economic or social factors in which women usually find themselves in fishing committees, their roles must be clearly defined to cover three areas—familial, socio-cultural and economic with the economic role being the most important.