



INITIATIVE ON
Gender Equality

Empowering Women in Fisheries: A Gender-Transformative Journey in Muleba District of Kagera Region in Tanzania

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Contents

Introduction	3
Intervention Description	4
Identified Leverage Points	4
Gender Dynamics and Leadership in BMUs	8
Addressing Challenges in Fish Processing	8
Conclusion	8

Introduction

HER+ is a One CGIAR Initiative seeking to address the following four dimensions of gender inequality in agrifood systems (AFSs):

- Women lack agency or have limited ability to define and act on goals, make decisions that matter to them, and participate in the economy and public life;
- Women lack access to and control over resources;
- Social norms discriminate based on gender; and
- Policies and governance fail to include and benefit women.

The HER+ Initiative uses impactful gender research to address these four dimensions of gender inequality by applying gender-transformative approaches to address harmful norms. It does this by bundling innovations for women's empowerment, leveraging social protection to increase women's access to and control over resources, and promoting inclusive governance and policies for increased resilience.

HER+ will generate learning and evidence on levers and entry points to disrupt the foundations of inequality in AFSs. The Initiative represents a gender-transformative approach to advance gender equality and bolster women's economic resilience within the fisheries sector. This approach aims to empower and engage women, men, and youth and dismantle inequitable norms through inclusive and collaborative interventions.

This outcome story is based on work implemented in Muleba District by WorldFish, the Tanzania Women Fish Workers Association (TAWFA), which is the Tanzanian chapter of the African Women Fish Processors and Traders Network (AWFISHNet), and the Environmental Management and Economic Development Organization (EMEDO). In Muleba, traditional gender norms have long restricted women's access to resources, as well as their decision-making power and mobility, particularly within fish value chains. These challenges are further exacerbated by the growing impacts of climate change, which disproportionately affect women's livelihoods in fisheries. HER+ addresses these barriers through a gender-transformative approach. This outcome story highlights how the Initiative builds on work previously done by EMEDO, has increased women's participation in the fisheries value chain, and has fostered a significant shift in societal attitudes, resulting in enhanced resilience to climate change.

Intervention Description

The HER+ Initiative employs a comprehensive intervention framework designed to challenge deeply entrenched gender norms that limit women's economic resilience to climate change in the fisheries sector. The intervention focuses on addressing restrictions on women's mobility and financial access, as well as their exclusion from decision-making processes at both the household and community levels.

The intervention prioritized the following norms:

1. Norms that limit women's involvement in community decisions related to fisheries governance and management.
2. Norms that restrict women from accessing financial resources and other assets, like boats, canoes and land, that enable them to recover in the event of a climate shock.
3. Norms against women buying sardines at night when they are landed and are still fresh.
4. Norms against women entering fishing boats and canoes to fish or select sardines.
5. Norms that restrict women in low-income fish value chain nodes, such as frying sardines.

The project engaged in the following activities to challenge norms against women's engagement along the fish value chain:

1. It organized and supported women's groups to encourage one another and raise their voices and concerns to community leaders.
2. It trained stakeholders and raised awareness of the role of women in small-scale fisheries in order to engage communities to challenge norms against women's participation and benefit. Community dialogues and workshops were facilitated by both female and male gender experts, and the Initiative raised awareness about the importance of gender equality in fisheries.
3. It promoted access to finance for women value chain actors, primarily by strengthening Community-Based Savings Groups (CBSGs). The Initiative targeted group members with financial management, savings, and business diversification training. This approach enabled women to access financial resources, including loans to invest in fish processing technologies, purchase fishing gear, or expand their businesses. Financial empowerment is essential in helping women build resilience against climate shocks.

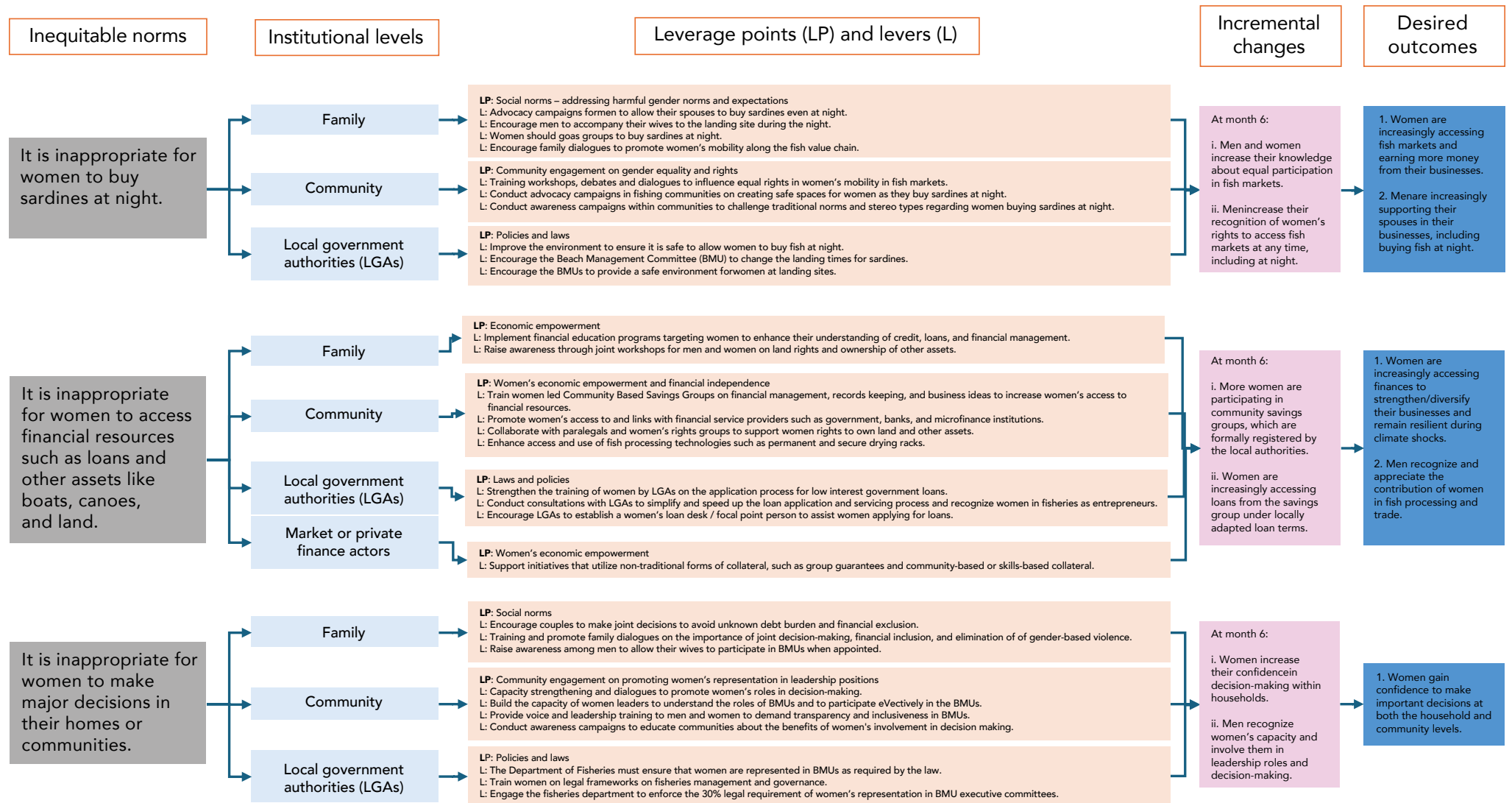
4. It provided women with business skills development. The project strengthened the gender capacities of local governance structures and facilitated a process to challenge fishers to develop collective solutions to provide a conducive environment for women to work in the sector. With the additional use of the Community Triangle Model (CTM) to strengthen inclusive governance in the community, the Initiative emphasized the importance of joint decision-making within families, encouraging men to recognize and support women's economic contributions. Workshops for women fish processors, including their husbands, focused on shared financial planning and leadership training, ensuring women were included in critical household- and community-level decisions. Media advocacy and identifying community mentors further amplified the impact, showcasing successful women as role models and encouraging broader female participation in fisheries.

These efforts have created an enabling environment where women are empowered to engage in fisheries fully and are recognized as key contributors to the economic and social fabric of their communities.

Identified Leverage Points

The HER+ Initiative's interventions were informed by prior research and shaped by participatory approaches implemented with men and women fishers and government representatives through the Kagera Regional Fisheries and Community Development Office. After the research was concluded, the HER+ team hosted a results validation workshop with government representatives and fishers. The main objectives of the workshop were (i) to present and validate the preliminary findings of the study on how gender norms constrain women's economic resilience to climate change challenges among fishers in Tanzania and (ii) to engage communities and stakeholders to identify leverage points to challenge gender norms and promote women's economic resilience to the impact of climate change in AFSs, especially in the fisheries value chain. Figure 1 shows the identified leverage points in the gender-transformative framework.

Figure 1. Gender-transformative approaches framework.



Results of the Gender-Transformative Intervention

At the end of the first year of implementation for the HER+ Initiative, we visited fishing communities around Lake Victoria in Muleba District to assess its impact. We consulted key stakeholders, including women boat owners, fish processors

and traders, fishermen, leaders of Beach Management Units (BMUs), and regional government authorities, to understand how the Initiative has influenced the local fisheries value chain.

Empowering Women in Fisheries and Gender Roles

Preliminary field observations reveal that women in the *dagaa* value chain have successfully challenged traditional gender norms, enabling them to take control of their businesses and livelihoods. Before the intervention, women faced challenges to access fish because of poor access arrangements, limited capital, threats to their physical safety at night, potential theft of their money, risks to their marriage, etc. These challenges excluded women from fully participating in the fish value chain, and limited access to quality fish reduced the profit margins women earned from selling *dagaa*.

Following the HER+ Initiative's gender empowerment training and awareness campaigns, women such as Flora, a fish processor from the Kalutanga fishing community in Muleba District, are now able to buy fish at night with their husbands' support. This cultural shift highlights the community's growing recognition of women's economic roles. Flora's husband, who once would have been ridiculed for allowing his wife to buy fish at night, now fully supports her endeavors. This shift in mindset is celebrated within the community, with other men also seeing the benefits of their wives' involvement in the business. Flora narrates this shift:

"Prior to the gender empowerment training, people saw my husband as less of a man if he allowed me to buy fish at night. He wouldn't even permit it, and I had to accept this as the

norm. The situation is now changing because I shared and we have discussed the training notes with him, explaining how it would benefit us as a family. My husband has also seen the advantages, so he now supports me and even escorts me to buy fish at night. Other women have noticed the benefits as well, because on a typical day, I have a better supply of fish compared to those who rely on middlemen. This has encouraged others to start doing the same."

Flora is married and has five children, the eldest of whom is preparing for university. She is the primary fish processor in her household and owns five drying racks for processing *dagaa*. She has formalized her business by obtaining a permit to transport *dagaa* to distant high value fish markets, including in Dar Es Salaam and Morogoro, which has resulted in significant cost savings. Initially, she was charged 40,000 TZS (Tanzanian shillings) at the security checkpoints for not having a license. She was not aware that she needed one. After receiving training on legal requirements, she now has a license and pays only 20,000 TZS, allowing her to reinvest the difference into her business.

Flora's involvement in fish processing has improved her household's economic standing and allowed her to develop entrepreneurial skills and engage more actively in community-based financial institutions.

Plate 1. Fish drying racks in the Kasheno fishing community.



Photo credit: Agness Chileya/WorldFish

Financial Empowerment and Savings Groups

The HER+ Initiative has been instrumental in reducing the gender gap in financial access by empowering women through financial literacy training and strengthening over 15 new and existing CBSGs, involving more than 1,000 women fish processors in the fisheries communities around Lake Victoria in Muleba District. The Initiative has provided women with the skills and confidence needed to expand their businesses. During interactions with cooperative members, women emphasized how the cooperative savings schemes have enabled them to secure loans and, thus, expand their business. For example, women from the Tuinuane savings group highlighted the significant benefits they have gained by working together, particularly after receiving training.

Tuinuane, which translates to “Let us uplift each other,” is a savings and cooperative group composed of six women, each contributing 20,000 TZS per month to a rotating savings scheme. Each month, one member receives all of the contributions and uses them to boost her business, and this continues until all six members have had a chance to access the funds. This group is also part of TAWFA, an umbrella organization for women’s cooperatives with a broader membership. Through TAWFA, members can buy shares, with prices ranging from 2,000 TZS to 10,000 TZS. Members can now borrow up to three times the value of their shares, offering greater access to capital for business growth. This access has allowed women to secure larger loans, expand their businesses, and improve their families’ livelihoods. As a result, their children benefit from better education, nutrition, and overall well-being. The ripple effect of this empowerment extends beyond individual households. These women have become role models in their communities, inspiring others to participate in financial cooperatives and embrace gender equality in business and domestic life at the community level.

The business, voice and leadership training provided to women fish processors and traders has also helped many confront traditional gender norms that previously limited their ability to earn more income and provide for their families. A notable example is Jenifer James, a fish processor and trader from the Kimoyo Moyo fisheries community. Jenifer has used her land to expand her fish processing business. She credits EMEDO and WorldFish for giving her the confidence to participate in BMU leadership, as well as providing her with financial literacy skills that have enabled her to take advantage of available resources to expand her business.

Jenifer now owns six drying racks, which she rents out during low production periods, generating a daily income of between 30,000 and 60,000 TZS. She explained that when production is low, she rents out the racks since she cannot use them to full capacity. During peak production periods, however, she utilizes all of the racks and can buy up to 100 bags (each weighing 85 kg) of *dagaa* at once, worth 30 million TZS. Expanding her business has enabled her to increase revenue streams and diversify her business into livestock farming. In addition to fish processing, Jenifer finds innovative ways to use *dagaa* bycatch, like shrimp, which she feeds to her livestock. She has diversified her income streams, further improving her financial stability, business growth, and resilience to climate change challenges.

The success stories of women like Jenifer and the women in the Tuinuane group illustrate the transformative impact of the HER+ Initiative, not only on women’s financial independence but also on their communities, where they now serve as inspirations for others to challenge traditional gender roles and embrace new economic opportunities.

Plate 2. Drying racks using old technologies in the Kimoyo Moyo fishing community.



Photo credit: Agness Chileya/WorldFish

Gender Dynamics and Leadership in BMUs

BMUs play a crucial role in managing Lake Victoria's resources, enforcing sustainable fishing practices, and protecting the environment. The BMU Secretary General of the Kimoyo Moyo fishing community acknowledged that it remains challenging for women to willingly take up leadership roles in the BMU. However, he emphasized that continued gender empowerment training could encourage more women to step forward.

Women like Jenifer have since joined the Kimoyo Moyo BMU and taken up leadership positions. Jenifer began a five-year term as treasurer in 2023, and her position has allowed her to actively participate in enforcing local fishing regulations, protecting fish breeding areas, maintaining shoreline cleanliness, and cracking down on illegal fishing. However, even though the BMU's guidelines require a minimum of three women among its 15 members of the Executive Committee, Jenifer is currently the only woman in her group.

Although Jenifer's participation in the BMU marks significant progress, other women in her community continue to face cultural resistance to joining decision-making bodies. For example, women like Flora and others in the Kalutanga fishing community still encounter obstacles when it comes to assuming leadership roles in the local BMU. Many feel uncomfortable speaking in public forums, fearing ridicule or disapproval. Currently, none of the women in Flora's community are involved in the BMU, highlighting the persistent need to address societal biases and foster a more inclusive environment.

Some key challenges that make women hesitate to join BMUs is the combination of the cumbersome election process, which allegedly involves corruption, and the societal norms that discourage women from speaking out and engaging in important decisions. However, the HER+ Initiative has started to shift these attitudes, encouraging women like Jenifer to take on leadership roles. Her journey serves as a model for future female leaders, demonstrating the impact of gender empowerment programs for challenging gender norms in traditionally male-dominated spaces.

The HER+ Initiative's gender-transformative approaches have created a strong foundation for women to step into leadership roles within the fisheries sector. Women like Jenifer, who have participated in the gender-transformative interventions, are now better equipped to advocate for gender equity and promote sustainable fishing practices in their communities.

Addressing Challenges in Fish Processing

Despite the progress made, challenges still remain. Women fish processors highlighted the challenges they face during the rainy season, when *dagaa* production is high, as significant losses occur because of the lack of sunlight for proper drying. Women emphasized the need to modernize their fish drying techniques to prevent quality degradation during the rainy season. They suggested that introducing drying machines could significantly improve fish quality and reduce losses during periods of heavy rain.

Additionally, *dagaa* off-loaders (locally known as *wasomba ngese*), largely dominated by young women, shared concerns about sexual harassment and bribery within the community. Women often face demands for bribes or sexual favors to secure off-loading jobs. They stressed the need for dialogues between boat owners and business leaders to address these issues. Increasing the number of women boat owners could also play a key role in empowering more women and reducing incidents of harassment. Currently, women own 20% of the fishing vessels in the Kimoyo Moyo fishing community, but increasing this percentage could help foster a safer and more equitable working environment.

Conclusion

The gender-transformative changes observed in the Kimoyo Moyo and Kalutanga fishing communities are a testament to the effectiveness of the HER+ Initiative's gender-transformative interventions. Women like Jenifer and Flora have not only challenged gender norms but have also set examples for future generations. However, continued support for gender empowerment programs is essential to ensure these gains are sustained and more women can benefit from opportunities in the fisheries value chain.

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