

From Africa/ Uganda

Fishing pioneers

A dynamic group of women take to fishing in Lake Victoria

by Margaret Nakato, a member of the Katosi Women's Fishing Group

We, the Katosi Women's Fishing Group, are a pioneering group of women in the region, engaged in fishing. We are 25 women who came together with the aim of improving our general socioeconomic situation. We use a locally built boat, with a 25 HP engine, and fishing nets of a mesh size recommended in Uganda to avoid catching young fish. We do fishing as a group activity, and, from the profits, we have created a Revolving Loan Fund that is a source of loans for the women members of the group.

It has not been easy for us to fish, as the men here tend to regard fishing as a profitable activity only for men. The group was met with resistance and a lack of cooperation from the community in the beginning, and we had to work with those men who were willing to help us reduce the resistance. Despite this, there are areas that continue to be 'out of bounds' for us. There is an island on Lake Victoria, which, according to custom, should not be visited by women, even though this island is a great strategic place to go fishing in some seasons. Our group has not ventured there, as this has been a tradition for a long time.

The men who support us work as our employees, or as suppliers of petrol and fishing nets, on credit. The man who is the chief buyer of our catch has also been very supportive of our cause, and this has given us more independence, rather than having to depend on our husbands and other men for support.

We fish in the lake Victoria. The Nile perch is the main catch, though tilapia, lung fish and a few other species are also caught. The Nile perch is mainly for export, while the other species are usually consumed locally. The fishing period is not continuous, as we catch more fish during the dark days of the month and almost none when the moon is bright.

Earlier, the fishing activity was almost eliminated due to a ban on fishing, imposed because of the illegal use of poison by some people in the community, eager to

reap easy profits. The spread of water hyacinth had led to a rapid decline in the fish population in the lake. It was at that time of fish scarcity that some fishermen began to use poison to catch fish. The members of our group were more oriented towards eradicating the weed, since it was affecting the whole landing site and thus the whole community. Fortunately, the government intervened to introduce a weevil that fed on the weed and, consequently, there has been a decline in the coverage of the weed, especially at Katosi Landing Site.

Since, with the exception of fishing, this area has no employment or income opportunities, the whole community suffered intensively as a result of the ban. Though the ban has since been lifted, the industry has not completely revived and is still limping.

Since our daily catch is still small due to limited equipment, it is sold to our chief buyer, who has a big boat with a freezer installed. The chief buyer patrols the lake, looking for fish from small boats like ours, and has the capacity to stay on the lake till the maximum tonnage is reached. This fish is then supplied to the fish-processing industries that are located at a distance of some 45 kms, in the capital city of Kampala.

We are thinking of going into fish processing since it is more profitable. Fish smoking and other forms of fish processing were activities local women engaged in earlier. However, due to the rise in the demand of fresh fish by fish-processing factories, women processors were forced out of business and are no longer in this activity. They took to activities, such as food vending, selling of secondhand clothes, selling fresh vegetables, local brewing, tailoring, running drug shops, poultry farming, etc. As we have been giving loans to women, we have found that women often do the same type of business, leading to duplication and low sales.

We think a processing factory will be a major achievement for the women in the area and a source of employment. Our plans include building a freezer boat and then building a fish-processing factory so that we can process the fish for export, instead of selling it raw. If our dream is realized, our project is going to be a pioneering one in the whole country. The factory will be owned jointly by the women of the group. It will enable the women in the area to enter international trade, create employment and will answer our campaign for industrialization. The fish-processing factories presently in Uganda are mostly owned by foreign investors.