



PROFILE

Fishing against odds

Fisherwomen of Lake Kivu fight against social stigma and discrimination with Mama Cynthia at the helm

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Mama Cynthia

Mama Cynthia serves as the resilient leader of the fisherwomen at Bagira landing site, located on the eastern shores of Lake Kivu in South Kivu Province, DR Congo. For 25 years, she has worked as a fisher, braving the waters in a journey that began when her late husband, a fisherman who tragically died in an accident, taught her the ancestral fishing traditions of the Mashi

people. This heritage now sustains her and her fourteen children, who depend entirely on her fishing endeavours for their livelihood.

However, Mama Cynthia faces immense challenges in her profession. In a society where fishing is traditionally deemed unsuitable for women, she defies customs that claim fish avoid the bait of menstruating women. These beliefs, combined with the male-dominated fishing communities and maritime authorities, subject her to social stigma and frequent harassment as she navigates the southern Lake Kivu basin.

Undeterred, Mama Cynthia takes to the lake at dawn, casting her nets alongside other fisherwomen affiliated with the Association for the Development of Illiterate Fishers of South Kivu. The group's work is essential

but fraught with obstacles. Equipment and pirogues must be rented per trip, and when financial resources are scarce, a portion of their catch is often exchanged to secure these vital tools. The continuity of Mama Cynthia's fishing activities relies on her ability to afford or acquire nets and boats, an economic hurdle she confronts regularly.

The challenges extend beyond financial constraints. The region is plagued by severe insecurity, exacerbating the difficulties fisherwomen face. Gender-based violence, theft, and extrajudicial seizures of nets and equipment are common, both at landing sites and in fish markets. Additionally, fisherwomen often struggle to comply with stringent legal regulations regarding their gear, which can result in further penalties.

Despite these adversities, Mama Cynthia stands out as a figure of extraordinary courage. She has become a mentor, training other women at the landing site and encouraging them to take up fishing as a means to support their families. Alongside the Alliance pour la Vie, a nonprofit organization, she advocates for safer landing sites across the southern Lake Kivu basin, championing efforts to eliminate physical, economic, and psychological violence against women in the region.

Through her persistence and leadership, Mama Cynthia continues to inspire her community, proving that strength and resilience can challenge even the most deeply rooted barriers. ❏