

A REVIEW

Women and Fish-for-Sex: Transactional Sex, HIV/AIDS and Gender in African Fisheries

Christophe Béné and Sonja Merten; *World Development*, Vol 36, No 5, 2008, pp 875–899

This review is by **Harini Kumar** (icsf@icsf.net), Programme Associate, ICSF

This is one of the few papers that provides information on the practice of fish-for-sex (FFS). Although FFS has been observed in several countries across the world, reports are mainly from African inland fisheries. This, according to the authors, is possibly because FFS is dealt with mainly in the context of HIV/AIDS, and Southern and Eastern Africa report the highest prevalence of the AIDS pandemic.

The paper emphasizes the strong link that exists between FFS and HIV/AIDS issues and importantly, articulates how a gender bias marks the existing literature on the subject. The authors seek to explore the complexity of the issue through an exhaustive methodology which includes a review of literature, a case study from Zambia, focus group interviews and various surveys conducted over a period of time.

Existing literature tends to highlight the 'miserabilism' narrative where FFS is viewed in terms of a victim's "strategy for survival", due to economic impoverishment. The authors suggest that this confusion is disputable, though the increasing vulnerability of female traders is a reality that undoubtedly reduces their negotiation/transaction power. They draw on the new institutional economic approach, according to which the reduction in transaction costs due to the practice of FFS, apart from the lack of cash, is an important factor. However, given the high prevalence of FFS in Africa as compared to

Asia, it is evident that poverty and transaction costs are not the only determinants of FFS in fishing communities. There are also socio-institutional factors relating to prevalent sexual norms and behavior.

The authors conclude that HIV/AIDS and FFS are conjoint consequences of the particular socio-institutional element of sexual behavior observed in sub-Saharan African societies. They go on to explain how the gendered division of labour is inherent in this supposedly male-dominated sector and how a simplistic view of "fishermen at sea and women at home" fails to address the larger reality of unequal power structures. Hence, due to the somewhat parochial approach that existing literature on HIV/AIDS takes, women are presented or addressed merely as sexual partners or wives and not as individuals in their own right. They are also stigmatized and socially excluded from the community for engaging in FFS.

The authors make the point that "women fish traders—whatever way they 'purchase' the fish, i.e., with cash or through sexual arrangement—are economically productive agents within the fisheries sector" who are fully integrated in the fish value chain. The links between FFS and sex work are, therefore, questioned. They draw attention to the many interviews where women state explicitly that they do not consider themselves as sex workers.

They stress the need to ensure that gender-bias is not reproduced in HIV/AIDS or in FFS literature, and subsequently in policy recommendations. Public health interventions should start by recognizing the deep gender bias that characterizes the sector. Prevention, awareness-raising, and empowerment interventions are needed to help women counter, individually and collectively, such power disparities. Interventions should be combined with actions that target male fishers and attempt to change their behaviours in relation to risk perception and sexual norms. Importantly, the socio-cultural factors need to be addressed in a contextual and sensitive manner. ■



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Writers and potential contributors to *YEMAYA*, please note that write-ups should be brief, about 500 words. They could deal with issues that are of direct relevance to women and men of fishing communities. They could also focus on recent research or on meetings and workshops that have raised gender issues in fisheries. Also welcome are life stories of women and men of fishing communities working towards a sustainable

fishery or for a recognition of their work within the fishery. Please also include a one-line biographical note on the writer.

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