

The Fish Mammies of Sierra Leone

Sierra Leone's artisanal fisheries would all but collapse without its fish mammies, entrepreneurial women in charge of post-harvesting activities, some of whom today even own boats and gear. But why aren't they their own bosses yet? This article finds out...

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The artisanal fishery of Sierra Leone at 120,000 tonnes accounts for 90 per cent of the national catch and is an important source of livelihood for coastal communities, with huge potential to reduce poverty. Two species, *bonga* (*Ethmalosa fimbriata*) and herring (*Sardinella spp*) account for 62 per cent of the artisanal catch. Fishing operations are undertaken using planked or dug-out canoes ranging in size from five or six to up to 21 metres in length. The Ghana boat, introduced by the Ghanaian migrant fishers in the 1950s, is the largest, while the Kru canoe is the smallest craft in the range. A Ghana boat could have between 10 and 30 crew on board while the Kru canoe is usually a one-man operation.

Fishing nets include set and driftnets, beach seines, ring- and cast-nets, handlines, pots and traps. Fish processing involves sun-drying on raised platforms (*banda*) and smoking using

ovens. There are no markets exclusively for fish products in Sierra Leone although markets in the capital city of Freetown, such as Dovecot, Kennedy Street, Bombay Street, Garrison Street, Krootown Road and Congo Market have sections for fish products. Poor road conditions hamper accessibility.

Limited post-harvest facilities are provided along the coast but there are no functional jetties at landing sites for unloading fish. Operations

across the fish chain are gender-based with men more or less restricted to catching fish and women in charge of all the subsequent activities. A careful examination of the role of women, locally known as 'fish mammies' in the artisanal fisheries of Sierra Leone, signals their indispensability in the running of the artisanal fisheries.

'Mammy' is the term used to salute a mother or an elderly woman in Sierra Leone. In the West African parlance, entrepreneurial women of sound financial stature in the artisanal fisheries are known as fish mammies. In Sierra Leone, mammies consolidate their collective power through economic organizations and institutions such as *Osusu*, a rotating savings/credit and labour organization, acting to share labour and profits, regulate market prices for fish inputs, and mobilize to protest against activities that might diminish their incomes.

In many West African countries these women have traditionally played vital post-harvesting roles. Today, they are diversifying from selling fish for profit to directly investing in fish capture. Like their male counterparts, nowadays women are also owners of boats and gears; they finance fishing operations and dominate the processing and marketing of fish products.

A recent gender and fisheries workshop organized by the Institute of Marine Biology and Oceanography (IMBO) and the British Council Development Partnership in Higher Education (DelPHE) Programme in Freetown, Sierra Leone revealed that women are more reliable than men for credit repayment, which makes them more reliable as development partners in the artisanal fisheries subsector. If fish mammies facilitate all stages of fish production in the artisanal sector by providing money as loans to fishermen and are also boatowners, fish processors, the principal marketers and fish distributors, then it is evident that they are the hub around which the artisanal fisheries of Sierra Leone rotates. Clearly, the fisheries would be handicapped without fish mammies.

Despite the wealth women generate from the fisheries of Sierra Leone, their economic activities are mediated within a male-dominated environment—on the coasts by fishermen, in the family by their husbands and sons and in public life by male-dominated

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Fish mammies at Tombo, with catfish landings. They are the hub around which the fisheries revolve

government, educational institutions and industrial institutions. Women may generate wealth but they do not necessarily own assets as most of their income is spent on meeting the needs of the household, making savings difficult. Women own less than 10 per cent of fishing assets and 40 per cent of their income goes into family expenditure.

Generally speaking, the role of women in artisanal fisheries and community development is overlooked by fisheries scientists and economists. In Sierra Leone, the roles these women play in the artisanal fisheries communities have been largely ignored. The Sierra Leone Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper made but passing mention of the need to empower fisherwomen. The Ministry of Fisheries and Marine Resources has no roadmap to take women in fishing communities out of poverty, as, historically, women's roles have been considered subordinate to those of men in fishing communities.

Fish capture, undertaken by men, masks a whole gamut of activities such as pre-financing, buying, processing, preserving and marketing performed largely or exclusively by women. Socio-cultural values and norms in Sierra Leone ensure that women are expected to give moral and physical support to the fishermen, while remaining submissive to their husbands in every respect. Women are not allowed to deny sex to their husbands who are largely unfaithful and shy away from using condoms, thereby increasing the spread of sexually transmitted diseases. It is a cultural taboo for women to be part of the fishing crew.

Women boatowners, unlike their male counterparts, therefore, cannot ascertain true landings by monitoring their crafts at sea. Child bearing and nursing also greatly impede the involvement of women in fishery activities. These are barriers to fish mammies' ability to contribute meaningfully to the fisheries and to community development as well as nation building. Despite these obstacles, women are overcoming many institutional problems to make meaningful contributions. Outside the domain of fisheries, women have been able to influence the outcome of national elections and participate fully in debates about food security and production. Their significant contributions towards the achievement of socio-economic and developmental goals in the post-war era have received recognition through increased entrepreneurship opportunities for economic empowerment.

However the flipside is that women too engage in practices which should be discontinued. Women are blamed for the proliferation of the illegal *mina* fisheries. *Mina* is the local name for juvenile herring. Women get free landings from this fishery and, as argued by workshop participants at a gender and fisheries workshop in June 2009, are culpable as receivers of illegal catch. Participants pointed out that poor fish mammies, because of their dependence on resale of the product, would be most adversely affected if the *mina* fisheries were to be stopped. Some fisherwomen also engage in transactional sex to acquire fish from fishermen and, thus, risk contracting and spreading HIV/AIDS.

Women also contribute to the overexploitation of mangrove forests. Field studies indicate that 46 per cent of women fish processors use mangrove wood for smoking fish. This unregulated use of mangroves destroys the coastal ecosystem and leads to environmental degradation by destroying the nursery grounds for fish and other marine and terrestrial fauna such as shrimp, crocodile, crabs and turtles. Mangrove wood is preferred because it is believed to produce more heat and impart an attractive aroma and appearance to the smoked fish. The poor handling of fish also results in further post-harvest losses. Sorting is sometimes done on the ground; the fish is not washed or cleaned properly and is sold in unhygienic environments. As a result, it spoils more quickly, leading to post-harvest losses. With an eye on enhancing profits, women sometimes postpone selling, which could lead to further deterioration of the quality of the fish.

In conclusion it may be said that the importance of fish mammies in the artisanal fisheries sector in Sierra Leone cannot be overstated. The subsector would virtually come to a standstill without them. Their domestic and community roles are very important although largely unrecognized. However, women also engage in environmentally unfriendly practices which impact adversely on their livelihoods and the environment. Policy recommendations should prioritize the issues of recognizing women's contributions, empowering them to participate fully in community and fisheries development and helping them to discontinue ecosystem misuse. ❏

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