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The cover image is sunset in Seoul along the Cheonggyecheon stream. Image by Stefan K on Unsplash.

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FISHER WOMEN AND JOB INSECURITY IN WEST AFRICA

By Ifesinachi Okafor-Yarwood



African woman carrying fish in a basket on her head on the local market in Assomada, Santiago. A large number of West African women rely on the blue economy to survive. Maa-ikeZaal/GettyImages.

West Africa's fisher women are experts at coping with job insecurity – but policymakers are using their resilience against them

All along West Africa's coastline, women play a vital role in the fisheries sector as processors, traders and distributors.

But they face many challenges – like job insecurity, a lack of finance, availability of fish and child care – and they're also vulnerable to shocks, like the COVID pandemic.

Simplistic assessments by government and non-governmental organisations will often praise their resilience in facing these challenges. But this masks the dangers inherent in some of their coping strategies, as we've shown in a recent study documenting their experiences in West Africa during COVID.

Women are adept at coping because they have to be. Compared with men, women carry a disproportionate burden of ensuring food is on the table for their families. This is because they're the ones at home whilst the men are at sea. Women will therefore often diversify their income sources to support their families.

Their ability to cope or adapt in times of adversity should not absolve states or governments of the responsibility to address the sources of their hardship.

Although there is an awareness by West African governments of the need for policies that benefit both men and women, countries across the region are failing at addressing their root challenges.

Challenges women in fisheries face

The main challenge is that women find themselves excluded from policy making and their contributions are largely undervalued by government and financial institutions compared to men who are counted and supported due to their contributions as fishers. Yet women are big contributors to the sector.

As the direct contact with the end-users, women are at the top of the value chain. The women traders pre-finance fishing activities, are the owners of boats, and purchase outboard engines, food for the crew or fuel for fishing trips. Though often invisible to the casual observer, women are the power behind fishing enterprises and the settlements along rich fishing grounds.

These dynamics produce gendered vulnerabilities. For instance, social expectations render women invisible and increase their earnings

gaps. Specifically, women's fisheries work is often perceived by policy makers merely as an extension of their household responsibility. These activities may include book keeping, gear repairs, and provisioning for fishing trips.

As a consequence, women are excluded from financial, and other, support from state institutions. This limits their livelihood security and makes them particularly vulnerable to disruptions threatening their already precarious livelihoods.

New challenges they face include the depletion of fish stocks due to climate change, pollution, over-fishing and illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing.

These challenges will affect men too, but women feel the impact more because their income are

dispelled on their families and they do not get support from the state.

They're also vulnerable to shocks. My colleagues and I examined the impact of the COVID restrictions on fisherfolk and saw how lockdown measures, travel restrictions and border closures all affected fish processing and trade.

Women weren't able to sell as much. The movements of fisher people were disrupted, so

there wasn't as much fish available. And fish spoiled because of curfews, market closures and because there were fewer women allowed at processing sites. Men were also affected by these disruptions but because they dominate the at sea activities, their disruptions were mostly restricted to labour and production.

The fisher women found various coping strategies.

Negative coping strategies

Fisher women find ways to cope with their challenges but some strategies – like those employed during the COVID pandemic – can bring negative outcomes.

One of these is the practice of “sex for fish” or “sex for finance”. We found that women engaged in sexual acts in exchange for buying fish on credit or in exchange for money.



Ortetha Sampon, 40, sells fish in Wa`terside Market next to West Point in Monrovia, Liberia in 2014. Photo by Morgana Wingard. (CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

This practice is not new and there are worrying health implications – like rising HIV/AIDS infection rates within fishing communities. Fishing communities in Africa have HIV infection prevalence rates 4 to 14 times higher than the national average, due to transactional sex.

Another coping strategy in Ghana was to involve middlemen and use technology. Women dispatched parcels of fish to customers via taxi or

public minibuses. They would get paid through mobile money before sending the fish. They managed to get the fish to their customers, but their profit was halved as they had to involve a third party.

Women shouldn't have to resort to coping strategies like these. In a time of adversity, the things that make them vulnerable must be addressed.

Supporting women

There are several steps to take.

Women need support in the form of finance and subsidies. They should also be included in fisheries related policy deliberations and their views represented. For instance, they must be supported when fishing bans link – to conserve fish stocks – are introduced.

Government must invest in infrastructure to help transform the sector. Investments would include an integrated cold chain to keep fish fresh, potable water supply to allow good hygienic practices, and innovative smoking facilities, so fish can be preserved and sold in a different form.

In addition, greater priority must be given to women's digital skills training. This would ensure

that more women take the advantage offered by technology to reach more potential customers and at an affordable rate.

Ensuring that women are not left behind requires access to affordable credit. For instance, establishing and supporting financial organisations – such as credit unions, banks and cooperatives to provide credit at affordable rates to women.

The government should also support women with easier access to markets. One of these markets should be the the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). Women already benefit from trans-boundary trade, and ensuring that they can cross borders to sell their products without disruptions will introduce them to new markets and increase their income.

Learning from past experience

Policymakers can also learn from some of the fisher women's more positive coping strategies.

Something we saw in several countries is that women coped by coming together, seeking out partnerships and opportunities. In Ghana, for instance, women formed community village savings and loan associations with the support of the West Coast Women Ambassadors, a civil society organisation.

The aim of these associations was to bring financial services closer to members. They also acted as a rallying point for initiating community development activities such as business education.

Because the association was well-organised, and presented as a group, the women were able to secure a loan from the Business Advisory Centre. This is a state public agency that provides business advice, training services and marketing avenues to small business enterprises.

They also partnered with Conservation des Espèces – a marine conservation NGO which focuses on protecting marine turtles and their habitats. In exchange for cooperation from the women's groups and their networks, the NGO will provide them with a cold room and ice factory. Cooperation included discouraging turtle poaching and encroachment on their habitats and helping the NGO to monitor turtles by reporting on sightings.

Romanticising women navigating adversity as strong, resilient and having supernatural abilities to endure disruptions takes attention away from the failure of the government to identify and address the source of their adversity.

Importantly, by addressing the root challenges of women, those of men will also be dealt with as the challenges are cyclical and interrelated.

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About the Author

Dr Okafor-Yarwood's research to date has generated critical insights around the blue economy, environmental justice, human security, maritime governance, and security. She brings a critical lens to the concept of sustainable development in relation to the management of marine and other natural resources and challenges the dominant assumptions on the areas of security, environmental justice, and maritime governance.

Her multidisciplinary research combines empirical (indigenous epistemologies), doctrinal, historical, and theoretical analysis to investigate the complexities that shape environmental justice, maritime and natural resource governance and security in Africa.

She is continuing to advance the understanding of sustainability as a question of resource management, environmental justice, and the disproportionate effects of depleting resources on security, poverty, and inequality.