

Invisible work, liminal spaces:

Women fish vendors and

the urban informal economy in Dar es Salaam

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1-1. Research Background: Fisheries in Developing Countries

- In Africa, fishing remains a **core means of livelihood**, and while forms vary, **the majority still rely on small-scale fisheries** (Binns et al., 2012)
- In Sub-Saharan Africa, small-scale fisheries are the backbone of local livelihoods and essential for the nutritional security of local communities (FAO, 2020)
- Traditional gender division of labor (Bradford & Katikiro, 2019)
 - > **Men**: Direct fishing, equipment management
 - > **Women**: Cleaning, processing, and selling caught fish
- This study analyzes **how women fishers who do not directly fish** transform the **identity of space** through a series of practices: purchasing fish at the market → processing it at home → selling it locally.

1-2. Need for the Study

The Other Side of Urbanization: Informal Economy

- Over 70% of the urban population in developing countries relies on **informal economic activities**, many of whom are urban poor (Samiji & Mutalemwa, 2025)
- Women constitute approximately **50%** of fishery workers, but their activities are **invisibilized**
- Research on the **gendered characteristics of women's labor** within urban fisheries is **extremely limited**

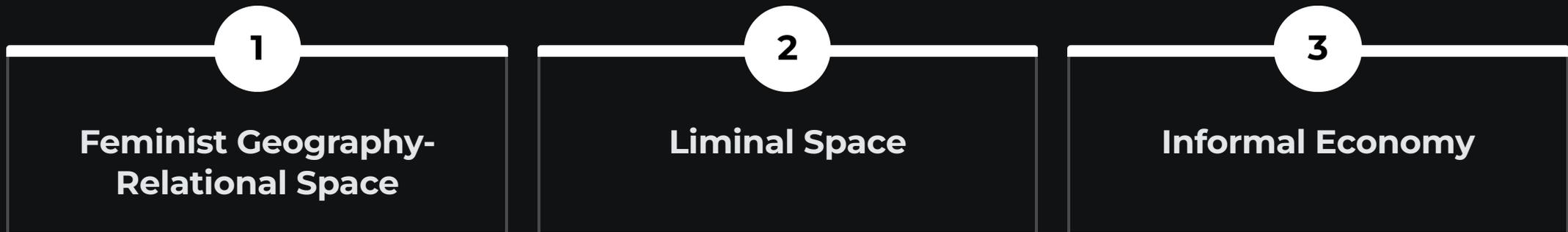
Research Questions of This Study

- **“Who is creating the informal economic spaces in cities, and how?”**
- **“How do women fishers' daily practices transform the identity of space?”**

Necessity of the Study

- This study aims to make invisible economic spaces visible.
- It provides a foundation for inclusive policies that support the overlooked actors of the city.
- Despite the critical role of women in the urban informal economy, there is a lack of detailed research on how women in small-scale fisheries actively construct and negotiate urban spaces in the context of rapid urbanization in Tanzania.

2-1. Theoretical Background



Feminist Geography: Women's Experience, Practice and Spatial Identity

- Traditional spatial concepts are fixed in public/private, formal/informal dichotomies (Baker, 2018; Massey, 1994)
- Space is not a fixed entity, but a social product constructed through relationships and practices (Massey, 1994; Lefebvre, 1991)
- Women's experiences are constituted by complex and gendered practices that transcend dichotomies (Kim, 2008; Choi, 2021)

Liminal Space

- Sharon Zukin: A point where spaces such as public/private, formal/informal, culture/commerce interact and intersect (Zukin, 1993)
- Liminal space is a space with a fluid identity, not fixed
- It refers to a space open to both society and individuals, but not yet belonging to anyone.

Informal Economy and Informal Space

- In developing countries, the informal economy includes diverse activities like street trading, cooked food sales, bicycle/motorcycle transportation, waste disposal, beauty services, and cleaning services.
- Informal space is operationally defined as areas where economic activities are not directly performed and are not recognized as institutional spaces.
- These spaces are often conceptualized as peripheries of areas where institutional and formal economic activities occur, or spaces outside the institutional gaze.

2-2. Theoretical Background of the Study: Informal Economic Spaces of Women Fishers



Relational Space

For women fishers, space functions as a relational space where social networks and practices accumulate.



Liminal Space

The practices of women fishers in the home and market constitute a liminal space that blurs the boundaries between public and private.



Informal Economy

Illuminating the meaning of informal economic spaces through an integrated theoretical framework of **relational space + liminal space**.

3. Literature Review

1) Feminist Geography

- Challenging the idea that space is simply divided into public/private or formal/informal (Kim, H. M., 2008; Massey, 1994).
- Highlighting that space is made and reshaped through relationships and gender.

2) Limitations of Current Spatial Studies

- Traditional urban research has focused on public spaces, planned commercial areas, and formal infrastructure.
- There has been little attention to informal spaces, such as household spaces, where women's everyday practices take place.

3) Gaps in the Context of Developing Cities

- Over 70% of urban populations in developing countries rely on informal economic activities (Samiji & Mutalemwa, 2025).
- In particular, the practices of women fishers are often invisible in statistics and under-researched.
- Urban studies have largely focused on high- and middle-income countries, leaving research on megacities in less developed contexts relatively limited. ns largely unexplored.

4) Geographic Bias in Domestic Research (Liminal Spaces)

- Domestic studies have mainly focused on street vendors in Seoul and Busan (Hwang et al., 2015; Kim, 2016).
- A few exceptions examine informal housing or factory sites (Chae, 2018).
- **Limitation:** There is a lack of research on informal liminal spaces in cities of the Global South

4-1 . Research Subjects and Methods



Research Design

- Research Methods: Semi-structured interview + Participant observation
- Research Subjects: 20 female fishers active in Mzizima Fish Market, Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, East Africa



In-depth Interviews

- Interviews conducted with an English-Swahili interpreter
- Questions focused on life experiences, practices within household/fish market



Participant Observation

- Accompanied on sales/processing/transport/care activities
- Documenting spatial mobility, modes of interaction, and ways of using positions within the market.

4-2. Research Subjects:

Participant Demographics



Education Level: Primary School or Below

- Most women fishers have only primary-level education or less.
- This limits their access to formal jobs.
- The informal economy therefore provides them with crucial livelihood opportunities.



Long Commute Times

- Every morning, women travel by bus or ferry for an average of 1–3 hours to reach the market.
- This creates a significant burden in terms of both time and cost.



Main Reasons for Livelihood

- Covering children's school fees
 - Providing household expenses
 - Sustaining the family in the absence of husbands
- 👉 This shows that their economic activities go beyond personal needs and are directly tied to the survival of the entire family.



Low Barriers to Entry for Occupations

- Many women previously worked in jobs with relatively low entry barriers, such as domestic helper, cook, gardener, and other food vending.

5-1. Home Space: Expansion into a Border Space

1

Traditional Reproduction

The household serves as a space for traditional care work and reproductive activities, such as meal preparation and child-rearing.

2

Fish Processing Workspace

- Homes are used as production spaces where fish are cleaned, dried, fired or smoked as preparation for sale.
- These multiple functions transform the household into a *liminal space* where care work and economic activities intersect.
- Private spaces thus extend to perform public functions by generating economic productivity.

3

Commercial Space

- Stalls set up in courtyards or along roadsides function as *sites of sale*.
- This reflects the nature of informal economic activities taking place outside formal commercial zones.
- The household is reconfigured as a complex space where commercial activities, family interactions, and neighborly exchanges occur simultaneously.
- Such blurring of private and public boundaries is a representative example of the “*liminal spaces*” emphasized by Sharon Zukin.



5-1. Home Space:

1) Agents of Community Food Distribution

2) Economic Revitalization

(1) Agents of Food Distribution Practice

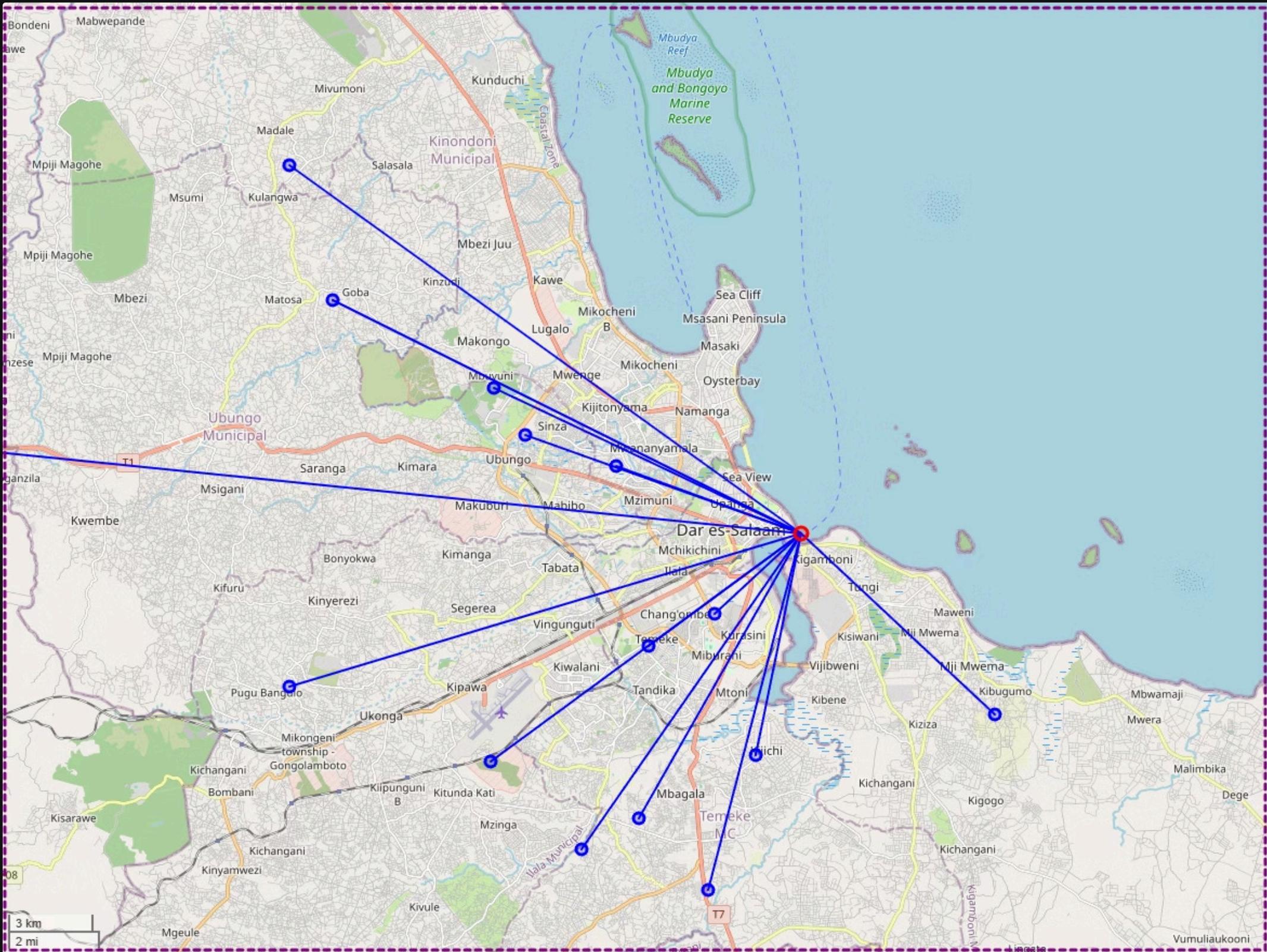
- Most women fishers **visit the fish market every day**
- They purchase fish regardless of rainy or dry seasons, process them at home, and sell them
- As a result, they **stably distribute fish to the local community**
→ *Serving as a diverse protein source beyond vegetables and meat*

(2) Key Pillar of the Local Economy

- Income from fish sales is spent on **children's education fees, rent, and food expenses**
→ *Functions as a source of continuous capital circulation for public education, housing, and livelihood*

(3) Implications

- Through their practices, women fishers form **liminal spaces (home)**, and their **invisible economic activities actually become the foundation for urban distribution and supply**
- Their practices function as a key mechanism that sustains urban sustainability.



"I come to the fish market every day, even if it rains, I come and work."

- From an interview with S

"Even in the rainy season, I can get fish. If I get them and sell them in the village, I can earn money. But sometimes, during the rainy season, I can't get anything at all."

- From an interview with L

"I don't have a husband, and I have two children, so I have to pay for their education. Public education isn't that expensive. The rent is 30,000 Tanzanian shillings (about 15,000 KRW) per month, but I have to pay 6 months' worth at once. Sometimes these things feel like a burden in life."

- From an interview with J

"I live with my mother and three children without a husband. I have a child in Form 4 (last year of middle school), another in Standard 2 (2nd grade of elementary school), and a 1-year-old who is being looked after by their grandmother. I am responsible for the livelihood of five people. My mother used to do the same work in Tanga (a coastal city near Dar es Salaam, the economic capital), but after coming to Dar es Salaam, my mother doesn't work, and I do the work instead."

- From an interview with P

5-2. Urban Fish Market as a liminal space: Practices & Strategies of Female Fishmongers

1

The Fish Market as a Formal Space

- Auctions happen at set times and places, following official rules.
- Due to limited initial capital, women fishers can only purchase small fish.
- The market has a clear **power structure**: it's mainly controlled by men who own businesses and stalls.

2

Fish Market as a Liminal Space (Periphery of the Market)

- Women use informal connections, like buying fish together in groups or deals based on trust.
- This informal network helps them participate in the official auctions.
- Female fishmongers **build their way of life by taking part in these auctions.**
- Waiting areas are places where people share information, mixing both business and personal discussions.

3

Space of Opportunity Amidst Exclusion

- Most stalls are owned by men, and entry barriers to labor unions in the market are high.
- As a result, many women use **other places to sell their fish, like their homes or roadsides.**
- The fish market becomes both chances to earn money and barriers that push women out, leading them to create their own alternative "Liminal spaces."



5-3. Women Fishers' Ways of Shaping Space

: “Beyond simple mobility — centered on relationships”

1 — Selecting Sales Spaces Centered on Relationships Rather Than Distance

- Female fishers choose where to sell based on trust with customers and regular contact, not just how close it is. “It’s not because my home is close, but because my customers are there, so I sell there.”
- This shows how their selling locations are built on personal connections, not just physical proximity.

2 — Entering Work Spaces through Family Relations

- They often get their jobs in fishing through family members like their mother, older sister, or father.
- Fish markets become places connected by family history and tradition, not just for business transactions.
- "It's my mother's legacy"

3 — Entry through Horizontal Networks and Work Experience

- Compared to past jobs, fishing is seen as “more manageable.”
- Women enter by learning from peers and rely on cooperation such as joint purchasing.

✓ — Implications

- Women fishers’ spatial practices are both survival strategies and gendered actions shaped within social relations.
- These practices allow us to reinterpret informal urban economic spaces: as places defined by human connections and networks, rather than just physical locations.

6-1. Conclusion: Summary of Research Findings

1

Household as a Liminal Space

- Care + Livelihood = **Liminal Space** at the Intersection of Production-Reproduction
- Women fishers function as key agents of food distribution and the local economy.

2

The Fish Market as a Liminal Space

- A space of economic opportunities, but also exclusion due to lack of capital.
- **Liminal space for formal participation** based on **informal networks**

3

The Basis of Spatial Configuration is 'Relationships'

- Spatial configuration through **social relationships and repeated practices**, not simple movement
- Gendered practices function as key elements sustaining the urban informal economy.

6-2. Conclusion and Future Research Tasks

1 Supporting Feminist Geography

This study empirically supports the **theoretical foundation of feminist geography**, which has criticized the **public/private space dichotomy**.

2 Informal Space as Liminal space

Traditional **informal spaces** such as **homes and markets** are transformed into liminal **spaces connected to the formal economy** through women fishers' **everyday practices and networks**.

3 Agency and Practice of Women Fishers

- Women fishers are not just **marginalized laborers** but **agents of space creation** through **relationships and repetition**.
- Their practices are the **invisible foundation** and **core driving force** for urban **food distribution, education, and economic maintenance**.

4 Contribution to Inclusive Urban Policy

This study aims to contribute to the establishment of inclusive urban policies by expanding the understanding of livelihood strategies in cities of developing countries.

5 Study Limitations

Future research needs comparative analysis of cases in other cities, or multi-layered actor analysis including male fishers, distributors, and government systems.

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