

Equity in Freshwaters: Addressing Gendered Gaps from Subsistence to Commercial Fishing in sub-Saharan Africa

Kafayat A. Fakoya, Modesta Medard, Ayodele Oloko, Meryl J. Williams, Nikita Gopal, Caitlin Doughty⁶, and Cecile Brugere



Why Equity Matters in Freshwater Fisheries

Scale and Importance of Freshwater Fisheries

- ❑ 99% of freshwater fisheries are small-scale or subsistence-based (IHH, 2023).
- ❑ 90% of inland fisheries occur in Asia and Africa, regions with high poverty rates and heavy reliance on fisheries for food and livelihoods (FAO, 2024a).
- ❑ Africa alone contributes **29.2%** of global wild-caught inland aquatic animals, second only to Asia (62.3%).(Adapted from FAO (2024b))

Women's Central Role

- ❑ In sub-Saharan Africa, women are pivotal actors in freshwater fisheries:
 - Household subsistence fishing.
 - Small-scale commercial practices.
 - Cross-border trading
- ❑ Their catches often sustain families and fund child-rearing, yet these contributions are excluded from official economic data (Harper et al., 2020, 2023).

Why Equity Matters in Freshwater Fisheries

Consequences of Exclusion

- Underrepresentation in policy → Women's needs and knowledge are ignored in fisheries management. (FAO, 2017; Kleiber et al., 2017, Mangubhai & Lawless, 2021).
 - Undervaluation of labor → Women remain underpaid and marginalized.
 - Deepened gender divisions → Lack of access to resources, training, and decision-making power.
 - Lost opportunities for sustainability → Studies show that when women are included, fisheries management improves across social and ecological scales (Chambon et al., 2024).

The Case for Equity

- Equity is not charity—it's strategy as part of a global initiative to elevate small-scale fisheries for women's agency and contributions can be fully realized. Closing the gender gap strengthens:
 - Food security (more inclusive and efficient use of resources).
 - Livelihoods (fairer distribution of income and opportunities).
 - Sustainability (diverse knowledge systems improve resilience of ecosystems)

Methods

- Scope: Reviewed 2000–2024 peer-reviewed studies, technical reports, and grey literature.
- Focus: Gender in freshwater fisheries—employment, roles, norms, equity in value chains, governance, and gaps.
- Approach: Broad desk review comparing fisheries with and without gender considerations.
- Aim: Highlight women’s roles in value chains, access to resources, and decision-making.
- Coverage: Major African hydrological basins.
- Freshwater fisheries and inland fisheries are used interchangeably.

Subregion	River Basins	Supplementary Notes
Great Lakes	Lake Victoria, Lake Malawi, Lake Chilwa,	Songwe River
Southern	Okavango Delta Panhandle	
Nile River Basin	Nile River, Sudd Wetlands, Baro-Akobo-Sobat river basin	
West coastal	Niger River Basin	Kainji Lake, Jebba Lake basin on Niger River; Shiroro dam and Doma dam; freshwaters systems in Kebbi and Sokoto River ¹³ Inner Niger Delta (IND) and Lake Selingue
	Cross River Basin	Lower Ikpa River
		Lake Fereruwa
		Mano River
	Volta River	Volta Lake
Sahel	Volta River	Tono Small-reservoirs: Moussodougou, Sourou, and Koubri
Congo Basin	Congo River	Lake Tshangalele, Congolese Cuvette ¹

Employment and Fishing Practices

□ Employment in Freshwater Fisheries

- **By sector**, women constitute 16% in inland fisheries > aquaculture (14%) > marine fisheries (3%). (FAO, 2025).
- Africa leads: 59% of women are subsistence inland fishers indicating the importance of fishing for food security (IHH, 2023).
- Women's participation surpasses men (40.9%) in subsistence inland fishing. (FAO, Duke University, & WorldFish, 2023)
- **Comparison:**
 - ✓ 7× higher than women in small-scale commercial fishing.
 - ✓ 3× higher than women in marine subsistence fishing.

□ Fishing Practices of Women

- Rarely fish alone → prefer groups, families, or alongside husbands (Nwabeze & Erie, 2013).
- Roles framed as “assistance” despite vital contributions.
- Low-cost methods → baskets, traps, nets, canoes in shallow waters.
 - ✓ Accessible techniques → little investment compared to costly gear.
 - ✓ Risks exist → some harmful practices (*poison* - TZ, River Songwe- Funge-Smith, 2018; Congo Basin- Gallois & Duda, 2016) and *mosquito nets* (River Songwe- Manyungwa-Pasani et al., 2017 - Lake Malawi- Manyungwa-Pasani et al., 2017)

Fishing and Gender Norms

- ❑ **Case Study on Benefits of Collective Fishing** : Dam fishing, community ponds, shared catches (**Burkina Faso**- Sanon et al., 2021; Zerbo et al., 2013), **Congo Basin**- Comptour et al., 2016; Gallois & Duda, 2016; and **Nigeria**- Liverpool-Tasie et al., 2024).

 **Social** - Builds solidarity & women's voices ; Safe space for candid conversations such as intimate sexuality intimate sexuality, and collaboratively resolve conflicting situations, and pathways to leadership & rights

 **Ecological** - Intergenerational learning on fish & ecosystems.

 **Cultural**- Passes on child development & social knowledge.

 **Household** - Fish shared across families.

 **Economic** -Provides income despite restrictive gender norms.

❑ Gender & Cultural Norms

- **Mali** (Bozo & Somono): Women confined to food prep, preservation, and distribution. (Berton et al., 2023).
- **Nigeria** (Argungu Festival): Few women participate—limited to drumming, songs, and dances (UNESCO, n.d.; Onihunwa et al., 2023).
- **Malawi** (Lake Chilwa): Safety risks, physical demands, and family duties restrict women to inshore fishing; some gear owners join crews. (Manyungwa-Pasani et al., 2017; Simmance, 2017))
- **Lake Victoria**: Cultural taboos and stereotypes label women as “unfit” to fish, reinforcing exclusion.(EMEDO, 2017)

Gender, Postharvest and Preharvest Roles

- Women predominate postharvest nodes → processing, marketing, trading, domestic duties
 - Women dominate *Dagaa* supply chain → DRC women financiers outcompete women Tanzanian traders (Medard, 2015; Medard, et al., 2019)
- Men's roles vary, in some contexts men lead, or roles are shared.
 - Male-led contexts →
 - ✓ **Nigeria**: socio-cultural restrictions, wives in *Purdah* smoke fish while spouse sell smoked fish (Ekundayo et al., 2005; Shinkafi, 2008; Nwabeze et al., 2013).
 - ✓ **South Sudan**: women excluded from fresh fish trade. (Mamuru et al., 2021).
 - ✓ **Lake Victoria, Tanzania**: export fisheries tied to inequities & GBV (“sex-for-fish”). (Medard, 2015).
 - Equal participation cases → fishmongers earn more than fishermen/processors (**Burkina Faso** -Sow et al., 2020); male retail traders earn more (Lake **Malawi**- Rice et al.,2023).
- Pre-Harvest: Women's Roles
 - Women Create, fix, and finance fishing gear.
 - ✓ Gear Fix: Women repair hooks, nets, and support husbands (**Nigeria**- Shinkafi, 2008; **Sudan**-Anton & Curtis, 2017).
 - ✓ Income generation: Young & elderly women join gear construction. (**Nigeria**- Ogah et al., 2009)
 - ✓ Credit power: Women *drive informal financing systems* and *faciliate market linkages* (**Nigeria**-Ekpo, 2013; Anyim et al., 2019) as intermediaries, wholesalers, and fishmongers (**Mali**-Tindall & Hovoet, 2008; **Ghana**- Abache & Owusu-Frimpong 2019, **Burkina Faso**-Slezak et al., 2020; **DRC**- Gordon, 2007).

Gendered Impacts of Threats To Freshwaters Fisheries

□ Women face the harshest impacts of climate change and pollution.

🌍 Climate Change (Volta, Ghana)(FAO, 2023c).

- Women adapt with alternative incomes, savings groups, cooperatives to reduce reliance on fish processing.

⚔ Mining (Lake Tshangalele, DRC) (Squadrone et al., 2016).

- Toxic spills → Copper & Cobalt exposure.
- Severe health risks for women & girls: miscarriages, infections, congenital disabilities

Gender & Fisheries Decision-Making

□ Policies weak or absent → male-dominated customary laws prevail.

- Women excluded from local administration & governance (**Nigeria** -SFLP & DFID-FAO, 2002; Nwabeze & Erie, 2013; **Mali**, Inner Niger Delta - Joffre & Lajuine, 2010Burkina Faso).
- Focus on post-harvest only → reinforces traditional roles, gender accommodative, not empowerment (Akintola et al., 2023).
- Barriers: Low literacy, family duties, cultural norms limit women's participation (**Burkina Faso** -FAO, 2006; Melcher et al., 2018).

□ Weak Implementation of Gender Policies

- Policies exist (**Tanzania** - FAO 2023b; **Malawi** - FAO, 2023a)
- Both countries are implementing National Plan of Action for the SSF-Voluntary Guidelines (VG),
- Women lack awareness, voice, and leadership roles.
- Women sidelined to finance/data roles, excluded from patrols & decision-making committees in BMU(**Tanzania** - FAO 2023b).
- Customs, illiteracy, and low institutional capacity block gender mainstreaming in the Sudd Wetlands. (**South Sudan**- Nile Basin Initiative, 2022).

Transforming Gender Norms: Case Studies for Adoption?

- **Men teaching wives fishing skills → women gain decision-making power** (South Sudan, Nile River- Laki, 2024).
 - Initial resistance → fears of lost caregiving roles & “physical weakness.”
 - Shift over time → men adapt as women’s participation grows.
 - Enablers of change:
 - ✓ Proximity to home & family.
 - ✓ Low-cost entry & quick skill uptake.
 - ✓ Education & exposure to new lifestyles.
 - ✓ Support from NGOs & development programs

- **Gender equality gaining ground in fisheries co-management** (Fauconnier et al., 2018).
 - **Mano River (Liberia–Guinea):** Women lead transboundary fisheries management.
 - Coordinated fishing days & shared information.
 - Strengthened communal welfare and peaceful coexistence.

Gaps & Barriers

□ Invisible Labor, Visible Inequities

👤 Women's work erased → subsistence fishing excluded from data & policy.

⚠️ Policy gap → weak or unenforced gender policies = “paper promises.”

🚫 Cultural norms → restrict women to food prep, inshore fishing, or symbolic roles.

🚫 Limited access → safety risks, family duties, and taboos block participation.

🛠️ Gear bias → women rely on low-cost, small-scale methods ignored in planning.

🔍 Document women's target species to inform tenure & fishing rights, strengthen conservation planning and inclusive fisheries governance.

New Perspectives & Opportunities

From Invisible to Indispensable

Hidden majority → women = 59% of subsistence harvesters in Africa.

 Multiplier effect → when women thrive, communities & ecosystems thrive.

 Collective fishing → builds leadership, social bonds, and intergenerational knowledge.

 Adaptive leaders → women models for co-management.

Transformative potential → research + strong gender policies = inclusive, resilient fisheries.

Equity isn't optional — it's essential for food security and sustainability.

THANK YOU FOR LISTENING!

