

A QUALITATIVE ASSESSMENT OF STRUCTURAL DRIVERS OF FISH FOR SEX EXCHANGES, AND TEENAGE MARRIAGES

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This study examines the structural drivers of fish-for-sex (FFS) exchanges and early marriages in kapenta (*Limnothrissa miodon*) fishing communities along Lake Tanganyika in Zambia. The research drew on 75 qualitative engagements, comprising semi-structured key informant interviews (KIIs) with government officials, community leaders, and service providers; focus group discussions (FGDs) with knowledgeable people, adult men and women, and young men and women; and in-depth life history interviews (IDIs) with women victims of FFS, victims of early marriages, and perpetrators (fishermen). The study sites were Mpulungu and Nsama Districts, with participants engaged at community, district, and provincial levels. All participants gave informed consent, with confidentiality and ethical safeguards strictly observed.

Data were analysed using NVivo 14 software in combination with manual content analysis. Transcripts were inductively coded, categorized, and synthesized into themes to capture multi-level structural drivers at individual, household, community, and governance levels. Rigour was enhanced through repeated transcript reviews, inductive theme development, and systematic categorization.

Findings show that gendered exclusion from fisheries governance, market access, and resource control continues to marginalize women's participation in Zambia's blue economy. Economic vulnerabilities, climate variability, unfavourable regulatory environments, informal credit systems, and socio-cultural norms emerged as key drivers compelling women to engage in FFS for preferential access to fish. Early marriage was also found to serve as a household strategy to secure access to fish through marital ties with fishermen. Women's labour in fish processing and trade remains undervalued, while systemic barriers such as alleged corruption in fisheries enforcement exacerbate gendered exploitation.

Recommendations include: (1) strengthening collective action among women in the kapenta value chain; (2) improving access to financial services and skill-building opportunities; and (3) enforcing legal protections against gender-based exploitation. By situating FFS and early marriage within broader structural inequalities, this study contributes to discourses on inclusive blue economies and highlights the need for gender-transformative approaches in fisheries governance.