

EQUITY IN FRESHWATERS: ADDRESSING GENDERED GAPS FROM SUBSISTENCE TO COMMERCIAL FISHING IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

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In sub-Saharan Africa, women are pivotal in freshwater fisheries, making indispensable contributions to food security and local economies. Their roles span from household subsistence fishing to small-scale commercial practices and cross-border trading. However, by addressing the barriers they face related to tenure, management, and conservation planning, their contributions and agency within the fisheries systems and economies could be greatly enhanced.

This study synthesizes findings from peer-reviewed articles and technical reports to unequivocally highlight gender roles in fishing practices, resource access, and decision-making. It is a crucial part of a global initiative that seeks to elevate the recognition of women's contributions to the fishing sector. Fisheries statistics clearly demonstrate that women involved in freshwater subsistence fishing are exceptionally impactful, with participation rates surpassing those of men. Remarkably, women's involvement in subsistence fishing is seven times greater than that of women engaged in small-scale commercial fishing and more than three times higher than that of women in marine subsistence fishing.

Across six selected freshwater fisheries—the African Great Lakes, Congo River Basin, West Coastal River, Volta River Basin, Nile River Basin, and the Sahel—women deploy low-capital fishing techniques such as damming, baskets, traps, and various nets (including mosquito nets) to effectively catch small fish and invertebrates in shallow waters. Often working in small groups or alongside their children, collective fishing delivers significant social, cultural, ecological and household benefits.

Women are also essential in the creation, repair, and financing of fishing gear. While post-harvest activities are dominated by women, men participate as well. However, entrenched gender and social inequalities within commercial fisheries supply chains—especially those targeting export markets—continuously challenge food security and livelihoods. Inadequate infrastructure, time limitations, restricted access to credit, and cultural norms significantly undermine women's participation and bargaining power.

While the information gathered in this research was robust, there are still gaps in information, particularly about women's subsistence fishing that is often not considered in studies on small-scale fisheries. Comprehensive research on women's roles and the fish species they target is crucial to fill critical knowledge gaps and to inform conservation planning, tenure and fishing rights and policies. Gender transformative policies, although often inadequately developed or poorly implemented, present a significant opportunity to make freshwater fisheries more gender-equitable. Furthermore, a deeper understanding of gendered livelihood strategies will enable effective changes in inclusive fisheries management and promote sustainable, resilient fisheries.