

Role of Women in Fisheries in Coastal Wetland Areas of Ogun State, Southwest Nigeria

*Odulete D. O., George F. O. A. and Idowu, A. A.

Department of Aquaculture and Fisheries Management, College of Environmental Resources Management, Federal University of Agriculture, Abeokuta, P. M. B. 2240, Abeokuta, Ogun State, Nigeria.

*Corresponding author; E-mail: Oduolaniyi@yahoo.com

Abstract

Fish is an essential source of animal protein and a primary supplier of essential polyunsaturated fatty acids specifically omega 3 and 6 fatty acids. Increase in population has placed high demand on fish products. Fish production has not been able to meet demand thereby creating a wide gap between demand and supply. Various efforts, such as introduction and encouragement of aquaculture, have been made to bridge the gap but to no avail. However, recognition of the role and empowerment of women in fisheries would go a long way to reduce, if not bridge the gap. Policy makers most often over-look women participation in making fish products readily available to consumers. Fish contribution from coastal wetlands to overall fish production can be improved through capacity building of women in fisheries. Introduction of new technologies, training, improved transport system and health services can boost fish production and enhance socio-economic status of the women fisher folk.

Key words: Women, fish, fish production, fisher folk, coastal wetlands.

Introduction

Fisheries sector is an important source of food and livelihood for many people around the world. Fish provides a vital source of protein and cash income for many families in the developing countries. About 200 million people throughout the world are estimated to depend on fish for all or part of their incomes (Akpaniteaku *et. al* 2005). Women play important role in fisheries and in maintaining households and communities. Although fish production is traditionally considered as masculine enterprise, women's role in fisheries is complementary and crucial. One of the most important commodity handled by women is fish (Akpaniteaku *et. al*; 2005). In coastal wetland communities, women are deeply involved in artisanal fisheries activities. These activities include unloading of fish from landing canoes, fish marketing and processing (Cochrane *et. al*; 2009); which basically form the link between production and consumption.

Traditionally, women are obliged to take care of the family in terms of feeding, clothing, schooling, health care (Nauen, 1989) and some other domestic chores like cooking, cleaning, fetching of water and firewood. These primary responsibilities are often combined with crop farming to support the family. Income-generating opportunities depend on local needs and circumstances and also on the ingenuity of the women in tapping them (Madhu, 1989). Families depend mainly on free fish supplied by the women of the household who are engaged in fish marketing (Adeyemo, 1983). Policy makers usually overlook the significant role women play in fisheries production and there is not enough information on women involvement in artisanal fisheries in the study area. The aim of this study is to highlight the relevance and contributions of women in the coastal wetland area of Ogun State, Nigeria in fish food security.

Materials and Methods

The study covered nine coastal wetland towns and villages in Ogun Waterside Local Government Area of Ogun State, Nigeria. The study area was divided into two major strata: lagoon and marine fishing communities. The lagoon fishing communities comprised of Iwopin, Ode-Omi, Makun-Omi and Awodikora-Osa while marine fishing communities included Awodikora-Okun, Igbeki, Olosumeta, Igbose, and Bolorunduro (Figure 1). Interviews were conducted with the aid of structured questionnaires according to FAO (1999) in the two strata (n=50 in each strata) of the study area. The questionnaire was used to elicit information relating to the general personal data of the respondents, educational level, and year of experience in the occupation, their roles in fishing, processing, storage and marketing of fish. Questionnaires were administered only to female fisher folks. The respondents were exclusively interviewed at fish landing spots, smoking huts, and market squares. Completed questionnaires were collated and analyzed with simple statistical tools such as frequencies and percentages. Pie and bar charts were used to elucidate variables of interest.

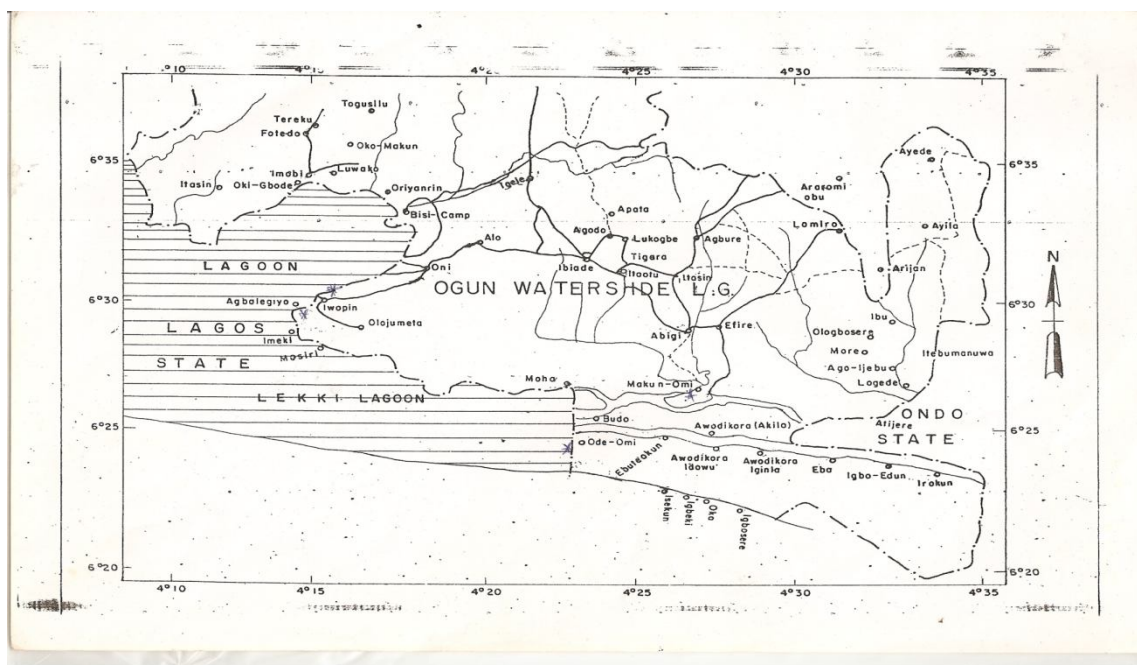


Figure 1: Map of the coastal wetland area of Ogun State

Results and Discussion

The results revealed that the age categories of the women fisher folk differ greatly from one another and that there is decrease in women participation in fisheries activities with increase in age in the study area (Figure 2). Age was an important factor in fisheries activities. However, respondents whose ages were between 21–30 years were the most prominent in coastal fisheries activities, which accounted for 40.9%. The women in this category are still in their active age to contribute meaningfully to fisheries production. Majority of the respondents (93%) were married women still living with their husbands while 2% were widows and 5% were divorced (Figure 3). Eighty-nine percent of the women interviewed in the fishing communities were noted to be from polygamous families while 11% were monogamous. Fifty-three percent of the women had an average family size of 5 children per woman. Riedmiller (1994) reported average family size of six children per woman in fisheries sector of Lake Victoria. The size of the family is a direct factor to the level of responsibilities carried by the women. The wives of the fishermen buy fish from their husbands and smoke them before taking them to the markets. Consequently, the fishermen tend to marry more than one wife so that they can have enough hands to take care of their catch.

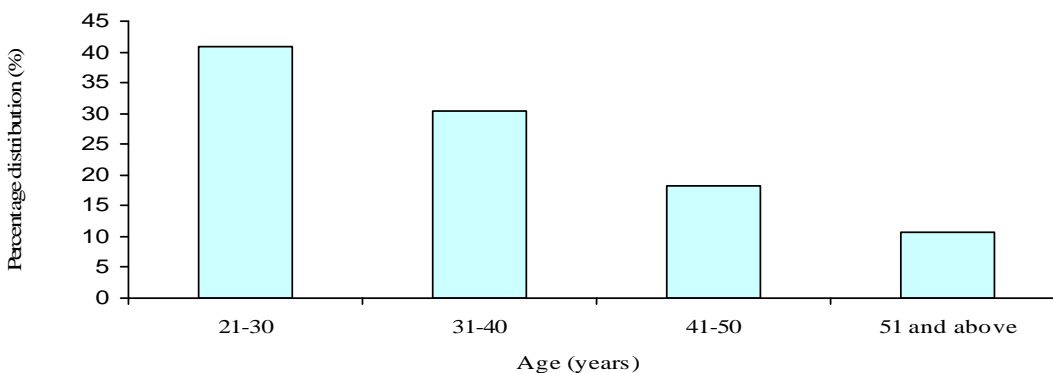


Figure 2. Age distribution of the women fisherfolk respondents in the coastal wetland area of Ogun State, Nigeria.

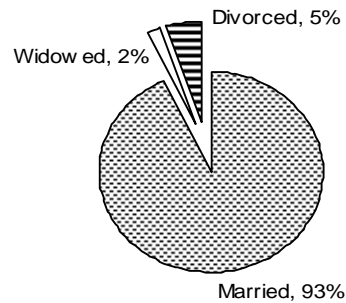


Figure 3. Marital status of women respondents in the coastal wetland area of Ogun State, Nigeria.

It was observed that women were not highly educated; only 20% had secondary school education, which was the highest educational level attained by the respondents (Figure 4). Suwanrangsi (2001) noted that educational status of women in the fisheries sector is inferior to that of men. Nauen (1989), Medard (2001) and Akpaniteaku *et. al.*, (2005) reported high degree of illiteracy among women in fishing communities and it was a factor limiting their active involvement in development process. The most common fisheries practice engaged by the women was marketing of smoked fish (63.8%) and active fishing (3.7%) was the least (Figure 5). This result corroborated the report of Akpaniteaku *et al.*, (2005) that in rural fishing communities, women are predominantly engaged in fish handling, processing and marketing. Engagement of women in active fishing is limited to the lagoon area in the study area; it is forbidden for women to be engaged in active sea fishing in the marine wetland area. In some cases, women that are middlemen bought fishing gear and hired them out to men for a share of the catch; which corroborated the report of Medard and Wilson (1996) and Medard (2001). Figure 6 shows that majority of the respondents (31.8%) had been in the business for over twenty years.

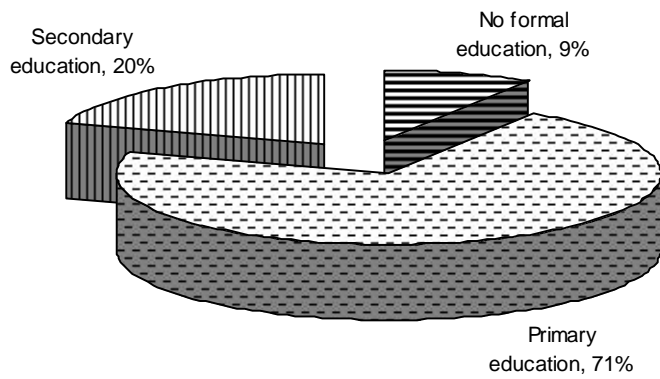


Figure 4. Educational background of respondents

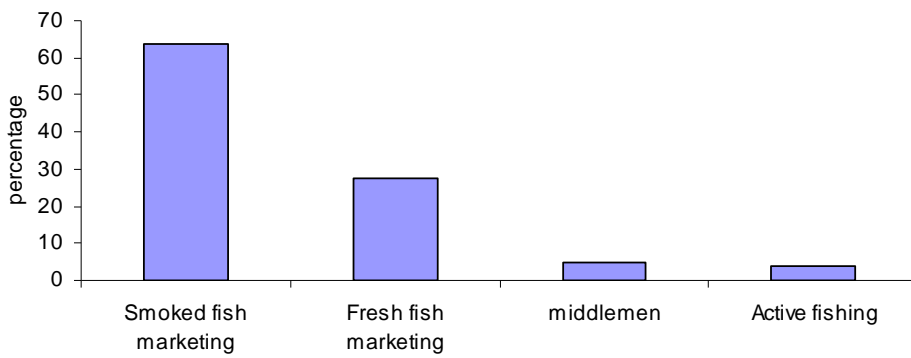


Figure 5. Fisheries activities engaged by the fisherfolk

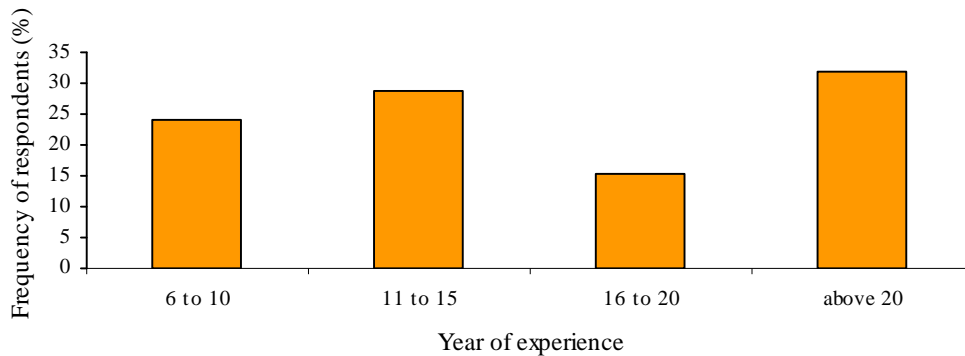


Figure 6. Experience of the respondents in fisheries business

Apart from fisheries activities, the results showed that 95% of the respondents were involved in multiple occupations such as crop farming (rice, cassava, maize and palm oil) and petty trading. This was necessary to augment their income especially during the period of low catch and unsteady market prices. Though they have separate budgets from their husbands, women contribute to part of the household expenses. Indeed, the role of women in providing for their families is crucial with the declining returns from artisanal fisheries. Families depend mainly on fresh fish supplied by the women of the household who are engaged in fish marketing (Adeyemo, 1983). Livelihood diversification is a means of risk transfer and reduction in the face of shocks (Cochrane *et. al*; 2009). Apart from active fishing, women engage in other fisheries activities and form trade unions, which moderate their activities. In Lake Victoria, active participation of women in direct fishing is limited to hauling of beach seine (Geheb, 1997). Gears employed by the women in brackish water ecosystem for fishing were traps of various type, set gillnets of small size and hooks coupled with small plank or dugout canoes as fishing crafts. Fisherwomen in the area may have been limited to these gears because of their strength.

Women in the study area are involved in post-harvest fisheries activities. Their participation in fish smoking activities contributes to availability of smoked fish products in the markets. It was observed that smoked fish products command higher price than fresh fish in the study area. This might be due to the fact that there was no other means to preserve their fish rather than smoking since they do not have electricity. Fisher folk lack the facilities to preserve their products and few storage capacities. Lack of means of preservation compel them to sell the fish they cannot handle by smoking fresh and at cheap prices because of the perishable nature of the products. Different types of oven were employed for smoking fish. These include box, mud, full-drum and half-drum ovens (Figure 7). Use of drum ovens was conspicuously absent in marine wetland area, which could be due to the salty nature of the area resulting to short life span of the metallic materials. All the respondents in the area make use of box oven in smoking their fish products. This could be as a result of large quantities of fish being handled at a time.

Ikiara (1999) opined that processing as a means of prolonging the shelf life of fish products is complicated by the additional cost it requires.

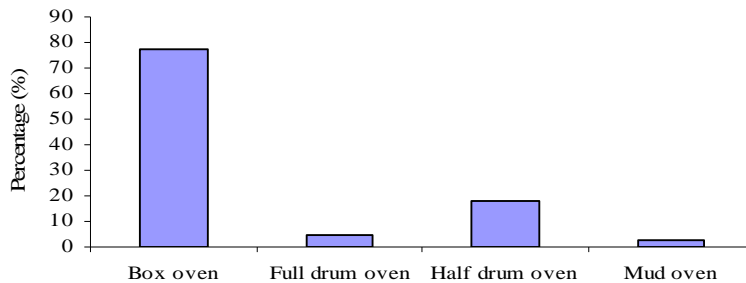


Figure 7. Types of oven used for fish smoking

Makun-Omi, Efire and Epe are popular market outlets, which serve as central markets for all the fishing communities in the study area. Smoked fish products from these markets are the principal source of cheap fish protein for the cities in the neighbouring cities and towns. Transportation of fisheries products from the marine beach to the markets is a herculean task because of the long distance and poor transport infrastructure.

The major constraints facing women in fisheries in the study area as depicted in Figure 7, included lack of fund, poor transportation, lack of fire wood for fuel, invasion of aquatic floating plants especially water hyacinth (*Eichonia crassipes*), which is peculiar to those in lagoon wetland area. Others were lack of gear and smoke from the fuel wood. However, insufficient availability of wood for fuel (83%) and lack of credit facilities (65.7%) were the major constraints militating against the women fisher folks. Sen *et al.*, (1991) reported that access to, and availability of credit facilities are one of the major constraints in fisheries sub-sector and that women in fishing communities have greater difficulties in obtaining formal credit than men.

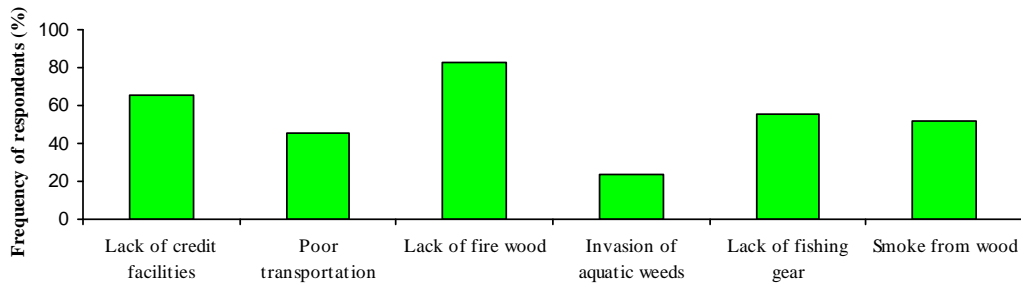


Figure 8. Nature of constraints confronting women fisherfolk in the study area

Conclusion

Women play predominant and significant role in the post-harvest sector of the coastal wetland fish production in Ogun State. Women's role in post-harvest processing, marketing and distribution of fish has not been given the right place. Women in the fisheries should be developed through extension training programs and skill acquisition, provision of credit facilities to improve their businesses, improve transport facilities, health and education services to improve their participation in development programs. Furthermore, women fisher folk should be provided with improved and affordable processing technologies for easy and rapid adoption. Women association should also be encouraged and promoted. Consequently, women fisher folk would be better empowered to contribute their quota to the actualization of one of the millennium goals – food security.

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