

Transformed mindsets

As fish in Kenya's Lake Victoria region becomes increasingly scarce, women fish traders in the region turn to fish farming to boost incomes and find a way out of the pernicious practice of *jaboya*

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Over the years, fishing has been a major income source around Kenya's Lake region. In Nyanza, and more specifically, around the shores of Lake Victoria, most families depend primarily on fishing for their livelihood. Small-scale or subsistence fishing, however, hardly meets the financial needs of families, who then often opt to send only the boy child to school while girls are married off early for the dowry.

Most communities in Kenya consider fish a delicacy. This is especially true of those living in Homabay County, along Lake Victoria in western Kenya. No family here would go without a meal of fish and ugali, a pounded mixture made from maize, sorghum or cassava flour. However, fish is no longer easily available for vulnerable rural households who have little or no money. Most people in the region surrounding the lake live on less than a dollar a day, yet fish may often cost between two to three dollars apiece. This difficulty in accessing fish has led to the practice of fishermen and women fish sellers transacting involved in a transaction in which sex, not money, is traded. This practice is known colloquially as 'sex for fish' and in the local Luo language, as *jaboya*. The 'sex for

fish' is also a nickname for fishermen who are customers of sex. The most vulnerable victims of this practice are economically disadvantaged women, including divorced women, widows, single mothers and even school going girls living along the beaches where fishing activities take place.

Fish catch in Lake Victoria has been declining over the years. Most vulnerable households and unemployed youth earn less than a dollar a day. This is much less than the cost of a table size fish that sells at slightly over two to three US dollars. Thus, for the poor, fish becomes a rare and often unattainable delicacy. With the decline in fishing, poverty has become rampant in the region, depriving the financially disadvantaged, particularly orphaned girls, adolescent mothers, widows, and single women of a chance to live a life of dignity. Walking the streets barefoot, in tattered clothes, with unkempt hair, and going to bed on an empty stomach – all this drives the victims into a state of desperation, where *jaboya* becomes an act of survival.

Jaboya is highly prevalent among fishmongers, who are forced to indulge in unethical survival tricks in order to get fish. The increasing involvement of fishmongers and fishermen in illicit sexual behavior has contributed to a breakdown of the moral and social fabric in fishing communities in the region, increasingly leading to family disintegration, divorce, and even early deaths. Sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV/AIDS results in dropouts among schoolgoing girls. Young boys are also victims, and often resort to drugs and alcoholism. Child labour along the shores of Lake Victoria is common.

STEFFEN KUGLER



Harvesting of fish in ponds in Kenya. Over 300 vulnerable families in Homabay County are currently engaged in operating fish ponds

HIV/AIDS has killed many caregivers and breadwinners leaving behind helpless orphans and widows.

Perez Rowa, 40, formerly a woman fish seller is now a fish farmer supported by World Vision Kenya. She packs harvested fish from her fish pond, in a cooler ice box, ready for the market. She had no option in the days before adopting fish farming, but to practise *jaboya* for fish on days when she had no cash. Perez Rowa says, “I used to do fish trade – some days silver cyprinid and other days tilapia. The business was difficult and tiresome but I did not have any option as I had to provide food for my children. Sometimes I did not have enough money to buy the fish at a wholesale price, so I had to meet the fisherman privately and ‘negotiate’ for fish.”

Perez has seen many of her former female and male fishmongers succumb to HIV and AIDS as a result of being forced into *jaboya*. World Vision Kenya, has transformed the lives of many women and youth in the region with the support of World Vision Germany and the German Federal Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) which funded the Integrated Fish Farming and Horticulture Project. Along with fish farming, the project promotes the adoption

of improved native poultry and horticultural farming, mainly vegetables and fruits. Women and youth are now able to access good quality fruit tree seedlings from tree nurseries, owned and managed by farmers, supported by the Integrated Climate Protection and Resource Conservation (ICPRC) project, also funded by BMZ, in collaboration with the Homabay County Government.

Perez says, “This [*jaboya*] was dirty business, done out of ignorance; it even led to HIV/AIDS. But thanks to World Vision, I am now able to engage in aquaculture. I have three fish ponds, each with a carrying capacity of 1000 fish that earn me an average income of 112,800 shillings (1100 USD) from one standard fish pond of 300 square meters. Now my children have every reason to smile as they have access to nutritious food on the table. I have also been able to support some orphan children acquire education.”

“Say no to ‘sex for fish’ practice,” is John Oyare’s slogan. Oyare is an ex-fisherman, turned fish farmer, and laments his days of practising *jaboya*. He parted ways with his fellow fishermen, quit fishing and embraced the initiatives of fish farming, being advocated and supported by World Vision.

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"I immediately sold my two fishing boats after attending trainings organized by World Vision," says Mr. Oyare. "Now I have a stable occupation, with three fish ponds integrated with vegetables, fruit trees and poultry farming. I have managed to sustain good nutrition for my family and my family income has grown. I oppose *jaboya* through advocacy."

Over 300 vulnerable families in Homabay County are currently engaged in operating fish ponds, with support from World Vision. Many vulnerable and low-resilient families, including poor women fishmongers have shifted to fish farms to harvest tilapia fish. Besides getting cultured fish, some women, have ventured into integrated fish farming, incorporating aquaculture with poultry and horticultural farming. These practices are spreading across Homabay County.

Margaret Seya is a model fish farmer in Gwassi South Sub County of Homabay County. Seya who practices fish farming along Lake Victoria believes that the solution to *jaboya* is for women and even youth to engage in fish farming since the capture of fish in the lake has become scarce and almost unaffordable for poor households. She has demonstrated that women can receive a stable income from fish farming. Seya earns a stable livelihood from harvest and the sale of fish to fish traders as well as to local consumers, and the money has enabled her to diversify into other economic activities. Seya encourages women to shun immoral and indecent fish trade, and move to fish farming as a way of livelihood.

The entry of youth into fish farming in Homabay County can bring to an end the pernicious practice of *jaboya*. With a membership of 14 young men and 16 young women, the Waringa Youth Group engages in fish and poultry farming besides undertaking other economic activities. The group is supported by World Vision through an Integrated Fish Farming and Horticulture Project. The project supports the youth with basic needs such as scholastic materials for themselves and their siblings, school fees, and nutrition to strengthen their resilience. Youth who are dropouts from school also find a safe haven in fish farming instead of being drawn to gambling and alcoholism. The Youth Group has so far realised a profit of 20,000 USD and contributed to support vocational training among orphaned children.

Aquaculture has greatly reduced stiff competition for fish among fish traders. Today, committed women who have adopted integrated fish farming report improved income and nutrition, and are able to provide for their children and other family basic needs. They are able to take their children to good schools for quality education and access health services. However, *jaboya* is still a threat along the beaches because the population of tilapia fish in Lake Victoria has dwindled and fish prices are high. Interventions of projects like the World Vision programme are very important to help restore dignity to the lives of the poor fisher communities around Lake Victoria. ❏