

Equal work, unequal earnings

A recent case study in Malawi explores the trading roles of women in fisheries in quantitative and qualitative terms

By **Emma Rice** (riceemma@msu.edu), Department of Fisheries and Wildlife, Michigan State University, United States, **Abigail Bennett** (benne592@msu.edu), Department of Fisheries and Wildlife, Michigan State University, United States and **Patrick Kawaye** (pchimseu@luanar.ac.mw), Department of Agriculture and Applied Economics, Lilongwe University of Agriculture and Natural Resources, Malawi

Women play important roles in fish food systems, especially post-harvest processing and trading of fish products. However, gendered inequities in fish food systems are common around the globe, limiting livelihood benefits for many women and their households. To promote gender equity in the sector, we need to ask the questions: Do women make as much money as men? If not – why?

To recognize the contributions of women to fish trade as well as understand their challenges, a recent project in Malawi, funded by the Alliance for African Partnership (AAP) Partnerships for Innovative Research in Africa (PIRA) grant, examined the trading roles of women in fisheries in quantitative and qualitative terms. Mixed methods are useful in gender analyses as the diverse types of knowledge complement

one another and provide a more holistic view of complex issues. In this research project, new insight into gendered inequities in small-scale fish trade were revealed by connecting specific gender norms, revealed through qualitative methods, to specific livelihood outcomes, measured through quantitative methods.

The research team, consisting of scholars from Michigan State University (MSU) and Lilongwe University of Agriculture and Natural Resources (LUANAR), collected gender-disaggregated market survey data from female and male fish traders throughout Malawi and qualitative data through separate focus groups with women and men fish traders.

Economic analysis of market data revealed that near-equal numbers of women and men are currently participating in fish trade in Malawi. While this finding indicates significant progress

MARCEL CROZET



Young fishermen from the Salima region (Malawi) repairing fishing nets seated on the beach. Economic analysis of market data revealed that near-equal numbers of women and men are currently participating in fish trade in Malawi



Women fish traders at Nkhotakota Market, Malawi. Equitable access to resources, including financial services and infrastructure, is necessary to facilitate equitable livelihood outcomes among genders

in the sector, there is still work to be done. The research team also found, that while women engage in the same trading activities at the same markets in similar numbers as men, women are earning less money per unit and tend to trade in smaller volumes.

Analysis of focus group data indicated that these differences in economic performance can be explained, in part, by gender norms which shape household decision-making regarding women's spending, limit women's access to resources including financial services and fish and maintain patriarchal power dynamics. Further, the team found that there remains a dominant narrative among men that gender does not impact economic earnings while women tend to understand gender as a barrier to economic success. This divide highlights the importance of engaging men in gender research to better recognize gaps in perceptions between genders.

This case study highlights the need to focus on gender equity in addition gender equality in fisheries. While gender equality, which focuses on equal opportunity, is a necessary first step for the improvement of conditions for women in fisheries, our study demonstrates that equality in participation is not sufficient. Once women have gained entry to participate in the sector,

gender norms continue to shape their success. Therefore, there is need for more transformative approaches to improve livelihood outcomes for women in fisheries.

This case study of fish trade in Malawi provides lessons for the broader fisheries sector. Applicable in many contexts, the research team outlined specific gendered challenges to be addressed by managers, policymakers, and practitioners, including lack of access to formal financial services, poor transportation, price volatility, lack of storage, and gender-based violence for small-scale fisheries actors. A key intervention toward improving livelihood outcomes for women in fisheries is improving access to capital for fish workers through formal financial services. Access to formal financial services has the potential to increase the volumes women trade in, thereby improving livelihood outcomes. Improved access to capital also helps to build adaptive capacity, enabling women to better respond to shocks. Additional interventions to improve adaptive capacity for fish workers include development of market infrastructure such as storage facilities. Equitable access to resources, including financial services and infrastructure, is necessary to facilitate equitable livelihood outcomes among genders. ❏

Equitable access to resources, including financial services and infrastructure, is necessary to facilitate equitable livelihood outcomes among genders