

The Gendered Dynamics of Production Relations in Ghanaian Coastal Fishing

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Introduction

Women's economic activities, especially outside the formal sphere, in Africa and elsewhere have been the focus of various studies. While their formal sector activities have drawn attention to the manner in which employment patterns challenge or support the status quo, in the informal economy women's income earning activities are often extensions of their traditional roles. Following Boserup's (1970) seminal work, several authors have noted that women in agricultural households are responsible for processing and marketing agricultural products (Bukh, 1974; Schultz, 2005b). In Ghana, women in all communities are responsible for agricultural processing, either together with men or alone (Duncan, 2004), and marketing agricultural products becomes an extension of this role. The situation is the same in fishing communities along the coast of Ghana where women are largely responsible for processing and marketing fish hauled from the Atlantic Ocean (Odotei, 2002; Britwum *et al.*, 2006). Female market systems, while compatible with women's gender roles as housekeepers and caregivers, provide avenues for female autonomy (Shultz, 2004).

This article offers a background for appreciating the interactions amongst women operating the fish-processing and -distribution industry in three matrilineal coastal fishing communities of the Central Region in Ghana: Biriwa, Anafo and Elmina. The information used here draws from previous work begun in 1993 and supplemented in 2001 and 2006. The main data-gathering methods were individual and group interviews mainly with fish processors, leading fishermen and some community leaders. The article shows that the mode of accessing fresh fish, which underlies the security of women's livelihoods, can undermine the empowerment potential of their income earning activities. The traditional production system has undergone change as a market economy gains a stranglehold in Ghana. Household,

community and market boundaries merge, causing a redefinition of gender identities in response to changes in production relations that underpin the coastal fishing industry. The production relations thus constructed generate differential positioning amongst women fish processors, affecting their ability to negotiate and secure their livelihoods. The economic policies that threaten the fishing industry are set to heighten the existing hierarchies amongst women, producing further tensions around gendered identities.

The article begins with a brief description of the structure of the fishing industry and the players within it. It goes on to explain how access to fresh fish impacts on production relations and their underlying market principles. It notes that the sexual division of labour is maintained through social norms that construct gender identities in a manner that supports the existing patriarchal system, and examines how this takes place. The article concludes that women's ability to break through emerging gender norms depends more on economic policies that strengthen the fishing industry and less on women's individual bargaining and negotiating skills.

Women's earnings: autonomy and control

Celebration of the economic and political power of the legendary market women of West Africa speaks to the emancipatory potential of independent female income (Clark, 1994; Schultz, 2004), even while some analysts bemoan the factors or events that lead to further marginalisation of women traders (Schultz, 2004). However, income-pooling arrangements for household expenditure have been identified as affecting women's ability to control their earnings and participate in household decision making. Yet, conclusions are varied, often contradictory (Clark, 1994). Schultz (2005a) notes that family income-pooling patterns determine the levels of autonomy that women will gain with increased earnings. Common pooling systems operate in male breadwinner societies in which women's autonomy tends to be circumscribed; partially separated income systems on the other hand allow economic independence of female and male conjugal pair.

Elson (1999) cautions against equating women's paid work with empowerment since several factors can undermine the impact of an independent income on a woman's status. Quoting Agarwal (1994), she insists on the examination of a number of related factors which are likely to affect women's earnings. These include the period over which earnings are sustained, the level of earnings, community attitudes to women's work

and the social legitimacy of women's claims (described as the attitudes and norms surrounding women's needs and rights). Other factors that can serve to undermine the empowering potential of women's incomes are reductions in income transfers from non-market sources as women's incomes increase (Elson, 1999: 615). The general conclusion is that independent factors such as the nature of income-earning activities, the social system within which women are located and household/conjugal spending arrangements are crucial determinants of the beneficial impact of women's income earning activities. However, a close examination reveals that these form part of interest mediation embodied within particular production systems that serve to maintain male power over women, even in situations where income-earning gives women some level of autonomy. Focusing on the varying degrees to which individual women negotiate such factors can serve to shift attention from the production system, which anchors male power over women.

Furthermore, while food processing and marketing are important income sources in Ghana, the tendency has been to consider women engaged in this sector as a homogenous group with operations geared towards meeting similar goals. However, increasingly researchers and development workers have realised that women's experience of subordination to men is mediated by factors such as age, class and race (Young, 1993). This differential positioning amongst women affects their ability to manipulate events to their benefit. Thus, the varying levels of economic success amongst female income earners in Ghana are better examined in terms of differences in access to economic resources and the social relations that structure this access. Focusing on individual ability and space for negotiations blurs the social distinctions and other forms of power relations between women, which may hinder the forging of solidarity for pursuing common goals.

Coastal artisanal fishing in the central region of Ghana

Most fish consumed in Ghana comes from the marine fishing industry, which can be divided into three main types: industrial deep sea; inshore; and artisanal or canoe fishing. It is the third type that is at the centre of discussion here. Artisanal fishing involves the use of dugout canoes propelled by outboard motors. Ghana's coastal stretch along the Atlantic Ocean provides fertile grounds for artisanal marine fishing. The Central Region is the centre of fishing activity. Historical accounts locate the existence of the fishing industry in the Central Region as early as 1471, operating in household-based units and

utilising small vessels. According to Odotei (2002), fishing spread eastwards from this area into what is now the Greater Accra and Volta Regions.

The three fishing communities under discussion are located in this region. Biriwa lies 12 km to the east of Cape Coast, the Central Region capital. As a small settlement, the population is largely homogenous. In the 1980s, several micro-credit schemes targeting women offered credit in the form of inputs for fish smoking through women's groups like ASAWA, UNDP and the 31st December Women's Movement. The fishing community of Anafo, on the other hand, is a suburb of Cape Coast located in the heart of the city. Though urban, it is home to a significant homogenous population of Fante origin. The third community, Elmina, is located about 10 km to the west of Cape Coast and serves as a district capital. It has the largest fish landing bay in the Central Region and as a result attracts fisherfolk from all over the country. This study, however, is focused on the locals involved in processing fish from artisanal fishing.

The role of women in the fishing industry is embedded in the culture of their communities through the structuring of their tasks and norms for accessing resources. In these communities, the mode of reckoning descent underscores inheritance of office and property. As matrilineal societies, the Fante coastal communities reckon descent through female ancestors who provide the blood link that binds families. Contrary to accounts that celebrate female autonomy under matriliney, these communities are male dominated, confirming the observations that matrilineal societies are not synonymous with matriarchies and do not grant female power over male (Manuh, 2003; Tsikata, 1989). The right to key traditional offices and socially valuable resources, even though accessed through the female line, is mainly available to males (Britwum *et al.*, 2006).

Fishing is a highly gender-segregated occupation (Odotei, 2003). Fishermen catch fresh fish, and women process the fish. There are two categories of artisanal fishermen: the capitalist fisherman and the working fisherman. Afful and Osafo-Gyimah (1979) explain that a capitalist fisherman is one who owns major fishing equipment such as a canoe, outboard motor and fishing net, and hires labour. The level of control exercised over a fishing crew is determined by the fishing equipment owned. The working fisherman, on the other hand, owns no fishing equipment but derives income from his labour in catching fresh fish. Capitalist fishermen who go to sea earn additional income from their own labour (Britwum, 1993). Though several types of fish are caught by artisanal fishermen, their fishing activity revolves around the seasonal herring

catch which occurs from July to September each year.

Once the fresh fish has been landed on the beach, women take over responsibility for processing and marketing. Women's role is significant because they add value to fresh fish, transforming fish into its monetary value, distributing and preserving fish to ensure its availability long after the peak season. Women therefore serve as a main source of family wealth and eventually, male wealth in the coastal fishing communities in Ghana (Odotei, 2002; Britwum, 1993; Bortei-Doku, 1991; Vercrujssse, 1983). Fish is processed mainly by smoking, curing and frying and is done on a relatively small scale. Fish processing methods are determined mainly by fish type and level of freshness when it is landed on the beach. Curing is reserved for fish which is not very fresh. Smoking serves to extend the shelf life of fish. Smoked fish can last as long as one year, allowing women some measure of control over fish prices by regulating the quantity released for sale in the market (Britwum, 1993). Fish processors also perform an important food security function, because poor food preservation and storage facilities generally deplete food harvests. Women are also responsible for finding markets outside their locality. Policy making, however, fails to take these roles into account.

The system of remuneration for artisanal fishing in the three communities is in kind. Portions of the catch are given out to cover payments for fishing equipment and fuel costs. Working fishermen receive a portion of the catch after a fishing expedition as wages and smaller portions for meals. Tradition requires fishermen returning from an expedition to provide fresh fish for household meals (*edzi-nam*). Remaining fish received for fishing work go to female relatives of the fishermen, mainly wives, for processing. Young unmarried fishermen hand over their fresh fish to their mothers who render account to their fathers, who give them some pocket money. Marriage for men constitutes an important avenue to gain control over their fishing income.

Fishing is a capital-intensive industry requiring high outlays for the purchase of a dugout canoe, outboard motor and fishing net. Running costs, especially the fuel component, are very high (Odotei, 2002; Vercrujssse, 1983). The cheaper fuel pre-mix is difficult to access for several reasons and consequently is a highly politicised commodity¹. Fishermen therefore have no choice but to rely on the more expensive petrol. The traditional arrangement is for women to provide money for fuel purchases since they have responsibility for turning fish into its monetary value. This role gives women a special position in the industry since the fuel cost is the number one priority in the distribution of the

fish catch. The precarious nature of the industry means that fishermen can be indebted to the fuel provider for long periods during the lean season. The role has sometimes served as an important leverage for women to acquire capital, fishing equipment, and to enter into the highest positions on the production chain, although their success, as Odotei (2000) notes, is dependent on men since they are barred from going to sea. In addition, where women's resources for fuel provision are exhausted, fishermen seek new partners, suspending their fuel arrangements with the traditional partners for the time being and severing these women's direct access to fresh fish.

Fish processor–Fisherman relations

The fishing industry provides a classic case of cooperation or complementarity where the organisation of production systems makes female and male economic activities inter-dependent (Schultz, 2005a). The conjugal union is at the same time an economic relationship embedded within a system of cooperation and dependence. Tradition obliges fisherman husbands to pass on their fresh fish to their wives for processing. Husbands, in turn, give their wives a percentage of the income earned from the sale of fish during the lean season for household maintenance. Wives are obliged to process fresh fish for their husbands and generate income to maintain the household during the lean season and provide husbands income for investment.

Fresh fish is a valued resource that provides wealth to the fishing community. Ownership therefore provides power. The positioning of men as owners of fresh fish reinforces the gender order and allows male access to female labour in the transformation of fish into its monetary value and the management of income to protect male wealth. Selling processed fish does not give women control over the income realised. This belongs to husbands, and the amount a woman gets is dependent on her husband's discretion. The fact that men can refuse their wives access to their fish strengthens their position in this marital/economic relationship.

In the past, fishermen gave their wives fresh fish to process for sale and render account at the end of the fishing season. The husband would then give the wife a percentage of the income earned, varying from 15 to 30 per cent within the three communities. The wife was expected to trade with this money in order to support the household during the lean season. Part of it would also be used to purchase clothing and other needs for children and herself. Fishermen are expected to invest the rest in fishing equipment and in building

a house. The mechanisation of fishing, particularly the introduction of the outboard motor, raised the cost of fishing equipment and meant that canoes and fishing nets had to be larger (Odotei, 2002). Fishing crews enlarged from small family enterprises of four or five members to 24 or more. With high levels of inflation and limited access to formal bank credit, fishermen had to rely increasingly on their earnings as the main source of capital to invest in the purchase of equipment. These economic trends have commercialised the traditional income arrangements between husbands and wives.

Women no longer receive fresh fish from their fishermen husbands for free. They pay the going rate for all fresh fish they receive. Fishermen record the quantities and price of fish delivered to their wives and expect to be paid for the total cost at the end of the season. The fact that the wife might have suffered losses from market failure is of no relevance. Business failure on the part of women is unacceptable and the communities do not tolerate it. Fishermen husbands believe they have fulfilled their household provisioning responsibilities once they provide fresh fish for processing. Women are expected to run the household on the profits from selling fresh and processed fish. Any further direct contributions to the household that men make are at their discretion and are not obligatory. Men believe that women make considerable profits, and some do not trust their wives to declare the true account of their marketing activities. To maintain the old tradition would be to give them access to more resources and power over their husbands (Micah *et al.*, 2000; Britwum, 2007).

The fish processing chain

Women in fish processing operate within a hierarchy of social relations, which devolves from the nature of their access to fresh fish (see Table 1). Women's major access to fresh fish depends on marriage and blood ties and is sustained by entrepreneurial skills, thus producing two main types of access, direct and indirect. These main forms of access position women in several layers of contact with the fishermen. At the apex of the fish processors' hierarchy is the *konkohembaa*, the Queen fish processor who, together with the *apofohene* (chief fisherman), fix the price of fresh fish at the beach. Next are the middle women (the *konkohembaa* was originally a member of this group) who receive fish from fishermen for further distribution to fish processors. Middle women are female relatives of capitalist fishermen (mainly wives) or contract partners – non-relatives who might have advanced a loan for the maintenance

of fishing equipment or for the purchase of fuel. All middle women sell fresh fish for on-the-spot cash and some might also process fish for sale. With the high cost of fuel, single contract partners are rare and several women now come together to foot fuel bills. Contract partners are usually in a position to purchase fishing equipment (Odotei, 2002; Britwum, 1993).

Fish processors are women who process fish for sale. They might have direct or indirect access to fresh fish from their working fishermen husbands or sons. Fish processors with direct access to fresh fish stand in a good position to become middle women or contract partners. The majority of fish processors, however, do not have direct access to fresh fish and as a result, receive it at a higher price. Several situations can cause fish processors to lose direct access to fresh fish, such as:

1. Fishermen husbands migrating because of depleted fishing grounds;
2. Fishermen husbands losing the use of their fishing equipment through accidents which are not infrequent;
3. Fishermen husbands might be so heavily indebted to contract partners for fuel that all the fresh fish caught from the expedition is used to defray the debt;
4. Indebtedness to fisherman husband resulting in his refusal to provide his wife with fresh fish until she has cleared her debt;
5. Widowhood, divorce, or estrangement from fishermen husbands.

Fish processors who have lost their direct access to fresh fish become trading partners of middle women who only sell fresh fish.

Table 1

Player	Role	Position
Queen of Retailers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Head female fish processor – Determines price of fresh fish 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Owner of fishing equipment – Contract partner – Wife of capitalist fisherman
Middle Woman	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Provides cash for fishing expeditions – Sells fresh fish – Processes fish for sale 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Owner of fishing equipment – Contract partner – Wife of capitalist fisherman
Fish Processor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Provides cash for fishing expedition – Processes fish for sale 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Wife of working fisherman – Woman with capital to purchase fresh fish

Player	Role	Position
Piece Worker Contractor	– Recruits women for peak season fish processing	– Women from farming communities
Fish Processor's Assistant	– Assists in managing fish processing and retailing	– Daughter/daughter-in-law, niece or aged mother of fish processor
Fish Processor's Help	– Assists in processing fish	– Dependent household member
Piece Worker	– Processes fish for a fee	– Woman from nearby farming communities – Fish processor with no money to purchase fresh fish or no access to husband's fresh fish
Head Porter	– Carries fresh fish from beach to fish processing site for a fee	– Adolescent woman

Source: Updated from Britwum, 1993

Marketing processed fish involves frequent travelling across Ghana to market centres in Accra, Kumasi, Tekyiman, Tamale and neighbouring countries such as Togo and Benin. The fish processor's assistants keep the fish processing enterprise running in the absence of the fish processor. Assistants also take over the management of the processing enterprise when the processor is too old to work, ensuring mother-to-daughter enterprise transfers. The assistantship is a form of apprenticeship and also provides social security for elderly women by ensuring a right to income and care.

Fish processing utilises the labour of female household members and young male school-going children. The helpers of fish processors provide labour but receive no remuneration as their involvement is considered to be part of normal household tasks and a contribution to the enterprise that provides their sustenance. During the peak herring season between July and September, household labour is unable to meet processing demands and piece workers are hired to fill the labour shortfall. Piece workers are also women from diverse backgrounds. They include peasant farmers recruited from nearby villages, who have just completed planting and are in need of income, and fish processors who have lost direct access to fresh fish and have no capital to purchase it. Piece work provides an avenue for fish processors to earn an income and even build sufficient capital to allow them to purchase fresh fish.

Piece worker contractors recruit piece workers for fish processing during the peak season. Fish processors usually advance a mobilisation fee for this purpose (Britwum, 1993), which is used to pay advances to prospective workers. The piece workers use these monies to settle their households in preparation for their absence, and to pay for travel to the fish-processing site. At the end of the season, the contractor settles her accounts with the fish processor who pays a fee for every worker that the contractor was able to recruit. At the bottom of the hierarchy are head porters, women who carry the fish from the beach to the fish-processing site for a fee.

Once it has been handed over to middle women or fish processors, fresh fish might be sold and resold several times. Depending on their position in the production chain, fish processors who do not have direct access to fresh fish might pay almost double the beach price. Fish is measured in wooden crates. The system of fish pricing involves a set price for this standard measure and an additional cost each time it changes hands. The length of the chain represents attempts by women to sustain their livelihoods. The longer the chain from fisherman to consumer, the more women enter the fish distribution process. The chain also offers different forms of risk-sharing and credit relations. Women seldom pay the entire cost of the fresh fish they purchase upfront. Usually a down payment of the additional cost is made, with the balance paid after the women have had time to process their fish. The pressure to sell and pay up debts means that fish processors with little capital cannot store processed fish in order to benefit from higher out-of-season prices. This reduces their ability to become financially independent and gain some measure of autonomy. The credit sharing arrangements, whilst serving to sustain livelihoods for women who would otherwise have no independent income, produce a hierarchy of relations amongst them, placing some women in a position of power over others.

The strength of the coastal fishing industry is its ability to provide employment for the entire community, but the industry's precarious nature means that it is subject to several problems, exposing income earners to uncertainties. Odotei (2003) and Bortei-Doku (1991) both note the high incidence of migration amongst Ghanaian fishermen along the West African Coast. Odotei cites economic issues as a major reason for this. The economic policies that undermine fishing have enormous consequences for entire communities along the coast, but women are the most vulnerable since they tend to remain at home when men migrate.

Gender construction and female economic autonomy

As noted earlier, women's spending patterns and men's share in family provisioning underline the levels of autonomy that independent income offers women (Young, 1993; Bryceson, 1995; Schultz, 2005a). Household spending priorities, which mediate production relations, are constructed around notions of masculinities and femininities. When asked to identify the qualities of an ideal man or women, respondents consistently mentioned men who owned property and could provide income sources and shelter for their wives and children. For women, being a good mother or wife who ensured that her children and husband were well-fed and clothed was the topmost quality mentioned. Being enterprising was also cited as a good quality. Maleness was therefore constructed around property acquisition. A successful man is one who is able to acquire property – either a house or capital fishing equipment. All fishermen aspire to this position. Men's ability to realise this dream is dependent on the entrepreneurial skills of their wives since women provide the key to wealth. Femaleness, however, is constructed around autonomy and subjugation underlying reproductive and conjugal roles and entrepreneurial skills.

In the fishing communities, female responsibility for family welfare constrained the ability of fish processors to generate wealth and decrease their dependence on husbands for accessing fresh fish. Thus even though women had complete control over their income, they were limited by their ability to transform this income into wealth and power, and finally autonomy. The prevailing notion of an ideal woman ensured that women remained faithful to their provisioning role, whilst men were encouraged to invest in property. Women in the fishing communities lament their inability to derive benefit from increased income because of the tendency of husbands to withdraw from household provisioning once they notice an increase in their wives' earnings. Women's autonomy is hindered by the same process that gives them the opportunity to earn an independent income: separate spending. Underlying female and male spending is what O'Laughlin calls separate allocative spending priorities, which are determined by their gender roles (1995: 75).

Women here earn income to support their responsibilities for household provisioning. The absence of formal old age social security and a pension scheme for people engaged in artisanal fishing further complicates female and male production relations within the fishing industry. The tendency has been for fishermen to set up their own fishing enterprise through the acquisition

of capital fishing equipment, a practice that ensures income in one's old age. This social security system however dovetails with the traditional inheritance system to disadvantage women. As members of a matrilineal society, the traditional inheritance system denies surviving wives the benefits of property acquired by their dead husbands. Neither do children born within this union benefit. Since property is passed through the maternal line, fathers and their children belong to different family systems and children from such unions do not have access to their father's property unless this is given as a gift during his lifetime. The PNDC Law 111 of 1986, enacted to provide protection for surviving spouses and children by allocating them the right to all family chattel should a man die intestate, is yet to take effect. This formula for sharing residual property gave surviving spouses and children the largest share, but few of the women interviewed expressed any readiness to stand up to the ridicule of their deceased husband's extended family. They cited the fear of being branded insensitive, or worse still a murderer, as deterrents from using the law to seek redress for dispossession of their deceased husband's property that they have toiled to secure (Britwum, 2007). In this particular instance, Bryceson's use of the concept "circumscribed autonomy" to explain the interconnectedness of women's and household members' interests and their willingness to engage in a relationship that entails a loss of autonomy seems relevant (1995).

The introduction of market principles into traditional production systems has distorted household, community and market boundaries and redefined gender identities. The prevailing notions of female and male identities legitimise male withdrawal from daily household provisioning, encouraging them rather to invest in property and wealth factors that expand their access to fresh fish. While the female provisioning role is emphasised, men are encouraged to renege on theirs. Women's obligations are bound to tradition while men are supported by modern market norms. The tradition which underscores practices within the fishing industry promotes patriarchal norms and assists in maintaining male control over women.

While catching fresh fish remains a male preserve, women have little opportunity to control their access to it. Men, on the other hand, are beginning to make intrusions into fish marketing as the fortunes of fresh fish production take a downturn and investments in fishing equipment begin to elude many. Women are yet to make corresponding inroads in fresh fish production. There are women who own fishing equipment and therefore wield

power over working fishermen and have direct access to fresh fish, but their success is constrained by their inability to go to sea. Odotei's work on women canoe owners in Ghana's port city of Tema notes that such women face the danger of having the male captains, who supervise the crew on their boats, taking over their boats altogether. She notes:

"It is remarkable that in spite of the traditional prejudice, women have reached the highest position in the fishing hierarchy as owners of canoes and fishing gear in the artisanal marine fishing industry. They maintain their position by using men to help them, though this is fraught with the danger of having power wrested from their hands. To solve some of these problems, they often use relatives as captains though this too is not problem free. Women who have sons to captain and participate in fishing operations seem to have better control of their business for their sons know that they will one day inherit their mothers' properties so they are obliged to take good care of them" (2000: 6).

Several social practices and beliefs operate to debar women from fresh fish production (Britwum, 1993; Odotei, 2000). But some fishermen believe that the mechanisation of fish production can break barriers to female involvement, as in neighbouring Cote d'Ivoire. The replacement of dugout canoes with boats reduces the need to paddle, and the winch for drawing the fishing net reduces the physical demands of fishing. Importantly, the skills required with these methods can be picked up in adulthood. Fishing with low mechanisation demands childhood entry into fishing, so boys can build the body mass required for dragging nets and paddling the canoe.

However, fishermen remain wary of the implications of women's participation in fresh fish production. It is fishing that gives men control over fresh fish, which in turn gives them power over women. For women to break this barrier is a task for the future, and state involvement in the mechanisation of fishing holds the key. Production relations within the fishing industry therefore constitute a key site for the redefinition of gender identities: currently, the modernity/tradition nexus is used to stress female autonomy in income earning but at the same time further subordinates them.

Access to fresh fish and female hierarchies

A woman's access to fresh fish depends on kinship ties, the most reliable being marriage. Her entrepreneurial ability and access to capital is important in determining how much control she will have over access to fresh fish

in subsequent years. Despite the commercialisation of the marital relations around fish production, women find direct access to their husbands' fresh fish most convenient, for it guarantees fish at a relatively low price which they do not have to pay in full until the end of the season. This system represents a form of credit relation between husband and wife. This traditional marital right, however, is tenuous and can be severed easily as a disciplinary measure for any behaviour that a husband considers displeasing. The standard for measuring acceptable female behaviour is the prerogative of the husband (Britwum, 2007).

Gender role allocation within the fishing industry allows women some measure of autonomy and opportunity to reduce dependence on men for access to fresh fish. But female ability to gain autonomy depends on the health of the fishing industry and is constrained by the gendered separation in household spending and an absence of social security arrangements inherent in the traditional inheritance system. Female negotiating and bargaining skills are only a secondary factor. The national economic situation, state policies and the vagaries of the climate which affect levels of the fish catch can also affect a woman's access to fresh fish and serve to place her in economic relations with other women. Fuel price hikes, for example, can sever female access to fresh fish as mounting costs can wipe out a woman's capital and her ability to fund fishing expeditions. On the other hand, dwindling fish stocks mean low catches and an inability to break even to cover the costs of fuel. Fishermen are forced as a result to enter into fuel provisioning arrangements with other women or to migrate. Losing direct access to fresh fish can propel a woman from being an independent income earner to dependence on other fish processors, narrowing their profit margins irrespective of their entrepreneurial skills.

It is the different modes of access to fresh fish that introduce hierarchies among fish processors. As women lose access to fresh fish, they enter into production relations with other women within the hierarchy of fish processing, either as trading partners or employees. Women without direct access to fresh fish are in the majority, and are continuously under pressure to secure an independent income in order to meet their domestic provisioning role.

Conclusion

Women's position operates to deny them direct control over fresh fish. A few women, through a combination of factors such as entrepreneurial skills and

access to capital, manage to gain some measure of leverage over access to fresh fish. But for most women, income instability from fish processing makes their access to fish dependent on a relationship with a man. In the absence of this, most women have to sell their labour to others or enter into credit arrangements to gain access to fresh fish. Economic crises undermine income security within fishing communities, impact upon social norms and traditions and relax male provisioning responsibilities, whilst holding women to account for male success.

The key issue for female wealth creation and income autonomy is household provisioning. Issues of social security and the power of conformity that propel women to provide support for male wealth creation to their disadvantage are also contentious. But looming large for women is the health of the fishing industry in general: the high costs of inputs; fuel deregulation; political manipulation of the cheaper premix fuel; and more recently, pair trawling which threatens to deplete the fish stocks in Ghana's waters. Women's entrepreneurial abilities will only serve to provide autonomy if the fish industry is healthy – a situation which would provide an opportunity for the norms of male provisioning to come under better scrutiny for change. Falling catches will lead to a deepening of the hierarchies amongst women and remove resource poor women further from direct access to fresh fish. Women's agency and empowerment lie in support to their livelihoods through strong economic policies promoting the industry. To this end, efforts made to impact the position of women which do not take account of the differential positioning of women in relation to the economically valued resource, fresh fish, might only end up strengthening a particular group of women and leave the vast majority still dependent on men for economic survival.

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Endnotes

1. The failure of the NPP government to retain power after the 2008 elections has been blamed largely on its dismal performance in the coastal regions of Ghana. Fishermen cite amongst a list of grievances that motivated them to vote against the NPP, rent seeking and political manipulation of the distribution of premix fuel.