

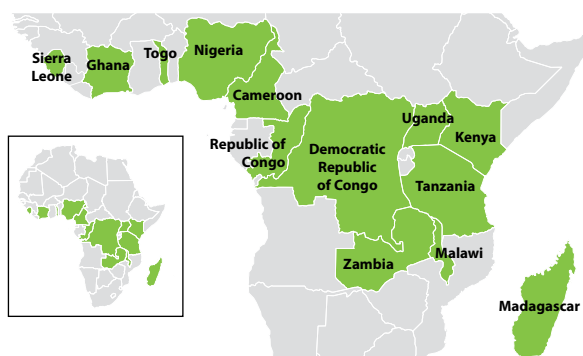


Photo credit: Steve Mann/WorldFish

## COVID-19 impacts on women fish processors and traders in sub-Saharan Africa: 10 recommendations for building forward better

The COVID-19 pandemic and accompanying responses have resulted in substantial disruptions to demand, production, distribution and labor in fisheries, aquaculture and food systems. These disruptions have severely impacted women processors and traders in sub-Saharan Africa, who are instrumental in shepherding fish and fish-based products from sources of production to rural and urban consumers. And yet, COVID-19 data and responses have tended to be gender-blind or overly representative of men's experiences and recovery needs. As a result, policy and investments designed on this data run the risk of further compounding COVID-19's exacerbation of inequalities and hampering effective and just recovery.

To address this gap and redress these risks, the CGIAR Research Program on Fish Agri-Food Systems (FISH) collaborated with the African Women Fish Processors and Traders Network (AWFishNet) and On Our Radar. By jointly examining the impacts of COVID-19 on women fish processors and traders across 13 countries in West, Central, Southern and East Africa, the team distilled 10 critical recommendations for sub-Saharan Africa's policy and development actors. The recommendations draw on key informant interviews and focus group discussions with national representatives of AWFishNet and first-hand accounts of women fish processors and traders' lived experiences, which were documented using a participatory reporting methodology from December 2020 to June 2021.



**Figure 1.** The 13 countries covered in this study.

### Key messages

- Women participate in all parts of fish food systems but are most visible in post-harvest processing and trade of fish. More than 90 percent of women in the African fisheries and aquaculture sector earn their livelihoods in post-harvest work (de Graaf and Garibaldi 2014).
- Women fish processors and traders are vital to the region's food and nutrition security. They add value and shepherd quality fish from sources of production to local, national, regional and international consumers.
- Preexisting patterns of inequality in fish food systems, including inequitable gendered divisions of labor and gender inequalities in financial and physical assets, have been amplified by COVID-19 containment measures and food system disruptions. As a result, women fish processors and traders have been hit especially hard by disruptions to fish food system functions, declines in individual well-being and reduced access to basic household needs.
- Effective and equitable COVID-19 recovery in sub-Saharan Africa requires that decision-makers and development agencies understand and immediately respond to the needs of women fish processors and traders and address underlying barriers to equity. Responses include listening to women in COVID-19 and sector recovery decisions and investing in strategies to address preexisting, harmful gender dynamics, like those that underpin harassment and transactional sex-for-fish practices. They also include building the resilience of women and the fish food systems in which they work by capitalizing on emergent opportunities, such as social protection that works for both women and men and strengthening growing networks of women entrepreneurs.
- Supporting and prioritizing an inclusive and equitable COVID-19 recovery lays the foundation for adaptive capacity and resilience of fish food systems and the women that these systems depend on in the face of future shocks.

## Women processors and traders have experienced severe income, asset and post-harvest losses, compounded by preexisting labor and financial inequities

Significant gender inequities existed in food systems even before COVID-19. Inequitable gendered divisions of labor persist as women carry higher burdens of unpaid domestic care work while being overrepresented in low-paid and informal work and underrepresented in higher return roles in fish value chains. Moreover, gender inequalities in financial assets and imbalances in power and decision-making at all scales reflect the fundamentally “uneven playing field” of food systems. As gender inequalities intersect with other aspects of identity, such as wealth, age, ability or education, some women were already experiencing multiple forms of poverty or marginalization before the pandemic. While the pandemic has negatively affected many food system actors, **these preexisting dynamics of inequality and gender barriers have amplified the hardships experienced by women, especially poor women, and their families** (UN 2020a).

COVID-19 disruptions to fish food system functions have impacted women fish processors and traders in many ways, the most severe and pressing of which is the economic hardship caused. This includes significant declines in both women’s incomes and depletions of their savings. As a result, some women entrepreneurs have lost their fish processing or retailing businesses entirely. Paying back loans has become more difficult, especially for poorer women, which has trapped some women business owners in the vicious cycle of taking further loans to repay loans. On top of this, increased competition for fish and reduced fish supplies have compounded women’s economic distress because fewer fish and fish-based products are being caught and produced.

Beyond the economic domain, women fish processors and traders have experienced negative impacts of the pandemic in relation to multiple aspects of individual well-being and basic household needs (Table 1). In some contexts, intensification of already unequal power relations has amplified power-laden and risky sex-for-fish transactions. Disruption to distribution and retailing systems has increased post-harvest fish losses through wastage of slow-to-sell products, which has impacted women more than men because of women’s greater participation in and dependence on post-harvest activities. Moreover, these losses in income and food have led to knock-on losses to food and nutrition security, with reports of some women reducing their food intake to a single meal per day. Overall, the financial insecurity, household or individual food and nutrition insecurity, indebtedness and increasing burdens of unpaid care work are reported to have substantially impacted women’s mental health and well-being, with notably greater levels of anxiety and stress.

## Policy recommendations to build forward inclusively and equitably

The UN has underscored that women experience a high degree of socioeconomic marginalization and thus require specific attention in COVID-19 responses to avoid responses worsening inequities (UN 2020b). The call by the UN reinforces the African Union’s own specific commitments to address gender barriers ([Agenda 2063](#), [African Union’s strategy on Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment 2018–2028](#)). These commit the African Union, regional intergovernmental bodies and national governments to legislate, finance and implement programs to address gender inequality, strengthen women’s agency and amplify women’s voices. To be effective in these commitments, sub-Saharan policy and governance as well as regional and nongovernmental programming must respond to the lived experiences and needs of diverse women and ensure that women’s voices are listened to in COVID-19 recovery planning.

Domains affected	Impacts	
Fish food system functions	Production disruptions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Reduced availability and accessibility of fish</li> <li>Increased competition and bargaining among post-harvest workers</li> </ul>
	Storage and distribution disruptions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Reduced traders’ access to consumers, thus consumers’ access to fish</li> <li>Increased storage requirements for unsold fish</li> <li>Significant losses where access to processing and storage infrastructure is poor</li> </ul>
	Retail and market disruptions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Significantly reduced market demand, retailing hours and marketing avenues</li> <li>Increased physical and quality losses of fish</li> </ul>
Individual well-being	Economic well-being	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Reduced profit margins and income loss</li> <li>Business failures and reduced bargaining power</li> <li>Increased debt levels</li> <li>Reduced ability to pay back loans or negotiate restructuring of repayments</li> </ul>
	Unpaid care work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Intensified unpaid domestic work burden and constraints on women’s time</li> </ul>
	Health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Routine exposure to COVID-19</li> <li>Reduced food intake</li> <li>Negative effects on mental health</li> </ul>
	Safety and relations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Intensified already unequal bargaining and power relations in the food system, including incidences of sex-for-fish transactions</li> <li>Increased harassment and exploitation by police</li> <li>Increased gender-based violence</li> </ul>
Family and basic needs	Food and nutrition security	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Reduced quantity and/or quality of household food consumption</li> </ul>
	Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Reduced children’s attendance in school</li> <li>Knock-on effects of potential dropout, especially for girls</li> <li>Reduced children’s nutrition</li> <li>Additional time and economic costs of having children at home</li> <li>Potential educational setbacks during time out of school</li> </ul>

**Table 1.** Summary of COVID-19 impacts on women fish processors and traders in sub-Saharan Africa.



Women’s needs and voices have been largely unheard in COVID-19 recovery in food systems, despite their vital contributions in food systems. As an overall principle, enhancing the visibility—and equitable voice of women in recovery processes—is essential for inclusive and effective recovery. The recommendations presented here reflect those voices. Women fish processors and traders from across 13 countries have come together with researchers to identify the key actions needed. These are intended to both equitably and inclusively secure the critically needed flow of fish to millions of households and address the perverse effects of the pandemic on women processors and traders. These evidence-based policy recommendations are for government, nongovernmental, civil society and development actors engaged in designing and implementing policies, programs and governance of fisheries, aquaculture and food systems in sub-Saharan Africa. **The 10 recommendations address the hardships faced by women fish processors and traders and their families that have been exacerbated by COVID-19. The responses are designed to enable women’s adaptive capacity while also addressing preexisting gender inequalities in fish food systems.** Implementing these recommendations will enable sector responses and investments to be more inclusive, equitable and effective.

- 1. Apply well-designed gender-responsive social protection mechanisms**, such as cash and in-kind transfers as well as employment schemes. These must reach, benefit and empower low-income women in fish value chains to prevent further asset loss and nutritional declines and spark local economic recoveries.
- 2. Extend affordable and flexible financial services and remove barriers to women’s economic recovery and empowerment.** These measures include savings mechanisms, loans, and debt forgiveness for COVID-19 recovery, as well as overcoming techno-social and financial barriers through enhanced access to digital financial services as well as lowered conditions and interest rates. In combination, these will promote financial inclusion and greater economic resilience of women fish processors and traders, and the supply chains they support.
- 3. Increase gender-equitable access and availability of affordable fit-for-user processing and storage technologies and improve processing, storage and transportation infrastructure.** Design more sustainable technologies, such as solar driers and biogas kilns, to meet women processors’ evolving requirements. Improve affordability and expand capacities of infrastructure, and create safer, more hygienic facilities that are responsive to women’s needs. These are required to enable businesses to grow and to reduce economic and food quality and quantity losses.
- 4. Increase investments in sustainable management of fisheries and aquaculture and in equitable, safe and dignified access to fish** to secure sustained flow of fish

in supply chains. This includes enhancing women’s direct access to and control over physical fisheries resources (fish, boats and gear, lakes and ponds) as well as fit-for-context strategies addressing transactional sex-for-fish.

- 5. Improve accessibility of formal and peer-to-peer business capacity development for women**, especially women from low-income groups. Include a short- to medium-term focus on business recovery and resilience. This is a foundation for women fish processors and traders’ economic empowerment, which is in turn vital for resilience of families and communities.
- 6. Address the digital gender gap by empowering women equitably through information and communication technologies.** Improving women entrepreneurs’ market connectivity and digital capabilities will help ensure that women are not left behind, but rather thrive, in the digital transformation. This requires investment in gender-equitable “last mile” access to devices, reliable electricity and internet, and accessible digital skills training for women.
- 7. Enable women to realize their right to information.** Removing obstacles to information access and building and supporting the capability of women’s networks lead to more effective translation of policy into practice and of lessons from practice into policy.
- 8. Enable gender-inclusive fisheries and aquaculture governance, and transition rapidly to women’s full participation and leadership in policymaking.** The former includes recognizing and counting (data on) women as key actors in the sector. The latter involves rapidly removing context-specific social and institutional barriers to women’s full engagement—including as leaders—at all levels and in all areas of policymaking that affect women fish processors and traders.
- 9. Proactively engage diverse women fish processors and traders, on par with men, in COVID-19 recovery planning processes**, including youths and people from disadvantaged groups. It is critical for recovery processes to recognize that the agency of women fish processors and traders is essential to effective and just recovery planning. Enabling women’s agency in this will require developing and applying processes and arrangements that allow diverse women fish processors and traders to contribute and be heard in shaping the design, development and implementation of COVID-19 recovery plans.
- 10. Invest in collective organizations and networks.** Financially resource and strengthen the networking and governing capabilities and voice of regional and national networks of women fish processors and traders, and build accountability and responsiveness of governance bodies to the experiences and leadership of women fish processors and traders.



Women fish processors and traders are instrumental in shepherding fish from sources of production to consumers.

Photo credits: Chosa, Mwanambwa, WorldFish (left), Edithweithi, Luananga, EMMDO (middle) and Anna Foxwold, WorldFish (right)

COVID-19 disruptions, responses and recovery outcomes, and how they evolve, are all shaped by the capacity of individuals, communities or systems to adapt to change. During the COVID-19 pandemic, adaptive capacities facilitated innovative coping strategies aligned with greater well-being (e.g. digital access and skills to retail fish online) while a lack of adaptive capacity hindered women's abilities to respond (e.g. poor access to affordable, fit-for-user storage and processing facilities), with knock-on impacts including food and nutrition insecurity and economic losses. As such, the 10 recommendations contribute to all five domains (assets, learning, agency, organization and flexibility) necessary for women fish processors and traders to strengthen their adaptive capacity (Cinner et al. 2018). Investing in these recommendations and prioritizing an inclusive and equitable COVID-19 recovery lay the foundation for greater resilience in the face of future shocks.

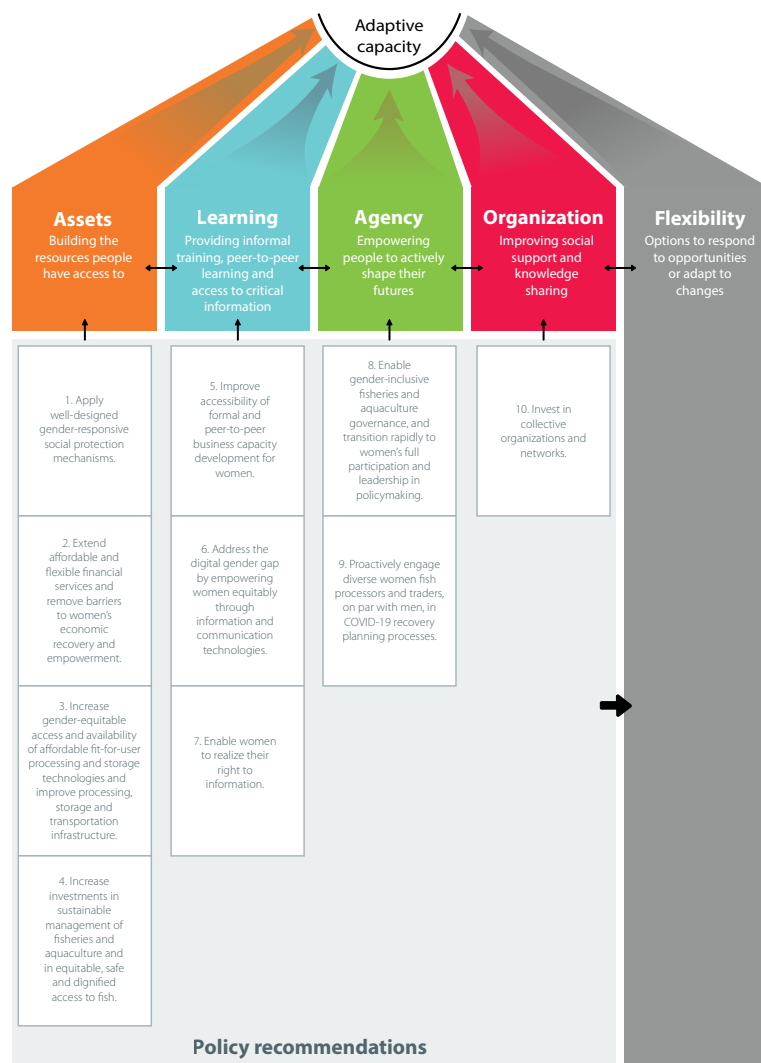
## References

de Graaf G and Garibaldi L. 2014. The value of African fisheries, FAO Fisheries and Aquaculture Circular No. 1093. Rome: FAO. doi: [10.1578/AM.40.3.2014.297](https://doi.org/10.1578/AM.40.3.2014.297)

UN. 2020a. Policy brief: The impact of COVID-19 on women. New York: UN. <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2020/04/policy-brief-the-impact-of-covid-19-on-women>

UN. 2020b. A UN framework for the immediate socio-economic response to COVID-19. New York: UN. <https://unsdg.un.org/resources/un-framework-immediate-socio-economic-response-covid-19>

Cinner JE, Adger WN, Allison EH, Barnes ML, Brown K, Cohen PJ, Gelcich S, Hicks CC, Hughes TP, Lau J and Marshall NA. 2018. Building adaptive capacity to climate change in tropical coastal communities. *Nature Climate Change* 8(2):117–23. doi: [10.1038/s41558-017-0065-x](https://doi.org/10.1038/s41558-017-0065-x)



**Figure 2.** Policy recommendations and their contributions to the five domains of adaptive capacity.

## Acknowledgments

This brief is based on close collaboration with the bureau members of AWFishNet, facilitated by Editrudith Lukanga and Anna Mkumbo of the Environmental Management and Economic Development Organisation, as secretariat, and through coordination by Anna Patel. Very sincere appreciation goes to the team of community reporters and partners at On Our Radar for their excellent input and guidance.

This work was undertaken as part of the CGIAR Research Program on Fish Agri-Food Systems (FISH), led by WorldFish, and the CGIAR GENDER Platform. Both are supported by contributors to the CGIAR Trust Fund. Additional funding support for this work was provided by the Oak Foundation and Lancaster University. The opinions expressed here belong to the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the FISH CRP, the CGIAR GENDER Platform, the Oak Foundation or Lancaster University.

## Citation

This publication should be cited as: McDougall C, Marwaha N, Atkins M, Cohen PJ, Patel A, Beyene BA, Goreth V, Hammad S, Kobusingye L, Lukanga E, Maisha P, Mkumbo A, Mountsoueke JP, Njeri S, Nyendwa K, Yerina A and Phillips MJ. 2021. COVID-19 impacts on women fish processors and traders in sub-Saharan Africa: 10 recommendations for building forward better. Penang, Malaysia: CGIAR Research Program on Fish Agri-Food Systems. Policy Brief: FISH-2021-17.

## Creative Commons License



Content in this publication is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC 4.0), which permits non-commercial use, including reproduction, adaptation and distribution of the publication provided the original work is properly cited.

© 2021 CGIAR Research Program on Fish Agri-Food Systems.

Led by



Funded by



In partnership with



UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM

Lancaster University