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The Impact of Maritime Crimes on Women's Livelihoods in West Africa



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Abstract

The Gulf of Guinea (GoG) has become notable for different kinds of maritime crimes including piracy, human trafficking, illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing, and human trafficking, among others. While women and men occupy unique roles in the maritime space, they are often affected differently by maritime crimes. Women, in particular, contribute directly to coastal stability while playing important roles in the Blue Economy. For example, women play major roles in fisheries value chains comprising production, processing, marketing, and the provision of after-sales services. Maritime crimes, such as IUU fishing, decimate fish stocks, erode the maritime environment; thereby, reducing food and economic security, especially of women and putting economic hardship on coastal communities. Although the majority of IUU fishing practices and forced labour in the fishing sector is conducted by males and children, women are also reported to participate directly and indirectly in these crimes. This paper examines the impact of maritime criminality, particularly IUU fishing, on the livelihoods of women in the GoG. It argues that women are critical to the running of the Blue Economy. They are enablers and at the same time, they suffer the adverse effects of maritime crimes on their incomes. Therefore, the paper recommends that maritime security strategies and policies should adopt a gender-responsive and human security approach, which can harness the potential of women in influencing behaviours and decision-making in their communities to bring about positive change and prevent participation in maritime criminality.

Keywords: Maritime crimes, Women, Piracy, Illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing, Human trafficking.

Introduction

The Blue Economy is increasingly receiving recognition as the new frontier of an African renaissance. The African Union's Africa's Integrated Maritime Strategy (2050 AIM Strategy), for instance, emphasizes a shift to a rather holistic and multidimensional approach to maritime security, which focuses on harnessing opportunities in the Blue

Economy for economic growth, improved livelihoods, job creation, and sustainable ocean governance.¹ Indeed, a developed maritime economy offers a range of opportunities to populations, including women. However, most of the sectors such as shipping, oil/gas extraction, trade, transport, tourism etc., outlined in the 2050 AIM Strategy, are mainly male-dominated sectors. However, women play essential parts in the Blue Economy and their activities are mostly confined to fisheries and aquaculture; more prominently, in the artisanal fishing sector. They make key contributions in the fisheries value chain from financing to production to processing to marketing to ensuring reliable food supply from the oceans. Nonetheless, as Okafor-Yarwood and van den Berg Bhagwandas put it: "they get a raw deal."² In the same vein, women's roles, contributions and potential in the Blue Economy have not been fully explored, understood or wholly captured to reflect the ramifications of maritime insecurity on their livelihoods.

Any form of insecurity at sea inadvertently affects security on land. Maritime crimes, such piracy, armed robbery at sea, illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing, among others, have correlating impacts on the sources of revenue and the security of the State and of its populations. It is important to further point out that men and women experience the effects of insecurity differently. Consequently, the reverberations of maritime crimes have differentiated impacts on women and men in the same way as their roles in the maritime economy vary. In the same way, women play diverse roles to foment insecurity in the maritime space. For instance, women may join and support pirate gangs as cooks or even as caregivers for kidnapped hostages.³ They may also act as spies and marketers of stolen goods for armed robbery (at sea) groups.⁴ They engage in exploitative activities such as forced labour and illegal fishing. For example, in the artisanal fishing sector, women directly and indirectly, engage in illegal fishing practices by sometimes financing and sponsoring the purchase of

¹"2050 Africa's Integrated Maritime Strategy (2050 AIM Strategy)," African Union, October 17, 2023, <https://au.int/en/documents/20130225/2050-aim-strategy>

²fesinachi Okafor-Yarwood and Sayra van den Berg Bhagwandas, "Women are a Mainstay of Fishing in West Africa. But They Get a Raw Deal," *The Conversation*, May 3, 2021, <https://theconversation.com/women-are-a-mainstay-of-fishing-in-west-africa-but-they-get-a-raw-deal-159283>

³Fiifi Edu-Afful, "Examining the Gendered Dynamics of Maritime Insecurity in the Gulf of Guinea," KAIPTC – Danish Maritime Security Project, March, 2022, <https://kaiptc-danishmaritimesecurityproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Examining-the-Gendered-Dynamics-of-Maritime-Insecurity-in-the-GoG.pdf>

⁴Edu-Afful, "Examining the Gendered Dynamics."

prohibited nets, chemicals and toxic substances such as dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane (DDT), carbide and explosives like dynamite to increase catch to support their livelihoods.⁵

Focusing on IUU fishing, this paper examines the impact of maritime criminality on the livelihoods of women in the Gulf of Guinea (GoG). Using empirical field research data from three countries in West Africa; namely—Ghana, Togo and Nigeria, it argues that women take on crucial tasks in the Blue Economy. They are both enablers and victims of the adverse effects of maritime crimes on their incomes. It is, therefore, important that maritime security strategies leverage on women's experiences and contributions in the maritime sector and integrate women's perspectives into interventions that are formulated to combat and prevent maritime crimes. The paper further proffers that maritime security strategies and policies should adopt a gender-responsive and human security approach to enhance women's prospects in changing attitudes, practices and decisions in their families and communities; toward averting maritime crimes.

This paper is organised into three sections. First, the paper discusses women in the Blue Economy in West Africa; highlighting their roles especially in the fisheries value chain. Second, drawing on case studies from Ghana, Togo and Nigeria, it examines the effects of IUU fishing on women's livelihoods; focusing on the complex nature of the problem, in terms of the perpetrators and the effects on women's incomes. Third, it provides some policy recommendations for the way forward.

Women and the Blue Economy in West Africa

The Blue Economy, as an emerging concept, refers to the sustainable use of ocean resources for economic growth, job creation and ocean conservation. It is also concerned with encouraging the sustainable exploitation, innovation and stewardship of the oceans for economic development.⁶ It involves a wide range of maritime activities including fishing,

aquaculture, shipping and logistics, transportation, tourism, and renewable energy. Globally, the maritime economy alone is valued at about USD 1.5 trillion per annum with 80 per cent of global trade carried out via maritime routes while providing over 350 million jobs worldwide.⁷ In Africa, it is estimated that the Blue Economy currently contributes nearly USD 300 billion to African economies while creating about 49 million jobs on the continent.⁸ Indeed, the Blue Economy offers opportunities to boost economic growth, create employment, ensure food security, and alleviate poverty on the continent. Yet, the unsustainable use of maritime resources and the lack of recognition of the maritime domain as a viable resource for development, pose a major challenge to benefiting from the huge opportunities it offers.

Globally, women's participation in and contributions to the Blue Economy are undocumented and often undervalued.⁹ In addition, women are highly under-represented in the formal sectors of the maritime industry; accounting for only two per cent of the 1.25 million seafarers.¹⁰ This also leaves a dearth of data on women in other formal sectors of the maritime industry, which means that women are overlooked and unrepresented in maritime and Blue Economy related strategies and policies. The situation is even more pronounced in the informal sectors of the economy where the majority of women are engaged.

Women's participation in the Blue Economy in West Africa is largely in the fisheries sector. The fisheries and aquaculture sector is also estimated to provide between seven to eight million direct and indirect jobs for fisher folk, fish processors, fish wholesalers and traders in the region; thus, playing a vital role in the population's socioeconomic and nutritional life.¹¹ It promotes rural development and boosts government revenue through fisheries agreements, licenses and taxes. It also represents an important foreign exchange earner for littoral states.¹² In many coastal communities along the GoG, women are both at the upstream and downstream sectors of the artisanal fishing sector; contributing to the entire value chain of fisheries, from financing to production

⁵Interview with fisheries expert and consultant, Accra, December 10, 2022.

⁶See "Sustainable Blue Economy," The Commonwealth, accessed December 15, 2022, <https://thecommonwealth.org/bluecharter/sustainable-blue-economy>

⁷The Commonwealth, "Sustainable Blue Economy."

⁸See "Blue Economy for Resilient Africa Program (BE4RAP)," The World Bank, November 15, 2022, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/environment/brief/blue-economy-for-resilient-africa-program>

⁹Dona Bertarelli, "The Blue Economy is an Ocean of Opportunity to Advance Gender Equality," United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, March 22, 2021, <https://unctad.org/news/blue-economy-ocean-opportunity-advance-gender-equality>

¹⁰See "New BIMCO/ICS Seafarer Workforce Report Warns of Serious Potential Officer Shortage," BIMCO, July 28, 2021, <https://www.bimco.org/news/priority-news/20210728---bimco-ics-seafarer-workforce-report>

¹¹"Diagnostic on the Effectiveness of National Fishery and Aquaculture Policies and Strategies for Food and Nutrition Security in West Africa," ECOWAS and FAO, August 2020, <https://doi.org/10.4060/cb2033en>

¹²ECOWAS and FAO, "National Fishery and Aquaculture."

to sales. They work as fishers, fish processors, shellfish harvesters, and traders in various fish and seafood products. Women constitute a significant proportion of the artisanal fishing workforce in West Africa. For example, in Nigeria, women account for 85 per cent of fish processors and traders.¹³ In Ghana, women account for 60 percent of fish traders while in Togo, women are responsible for up to 60 percent of fish processing and marketing activities along the coastline.¹⁴

Women's participation in the Blue Economy, particularly in the fisheries sector, has several advantages. For instance, their activities contribute to the improvement of the nutritional dietary in-take of the population; thus, helping to ensure the alleviation of poverty and the existence of adequate food security. They also offer employment to several thousands of less skilled individuals, which also contributes to supporting households. Similarly, in West Africa, pre-financing of artisanal fishing expeditions is often undertaken by women by providing fuel and food, and buying fishing nets, out-board motors and, in some instances, boats. It is estimated that pre-financing artisanal fishing expeditions could cost between 10 to 12 million CFA Francs (approximately, USD 17,000 to 27,000) while the purchase of an artisanal fishing boat could cost between 6 to 10 million CFA Francs¹⁵ (approximately USD 10,000 to 17,000). Women also undertake repair and maintenance of fishing gears. By these investments, they are able to build relationships with the fishermen, who guarantee them access to fish once they are landed.¹⁶

When it comes to women in artisanal fishing, gender roles define the sectors dominated by women. In all the countries under this study, there are no specific restrictions or cultural prohibitions for women to go fishing. However, due to perceived dangers, the long hours required to stay at sea, most women do not go to sea as they also have to keep the homes. Nonetheless, the few who may venture into fishing, would usually fish in smaller water bodies, lagoons and at the edges of inland water bodies, where they collect shellfish, oysters, crabs, and small fish species.¹⁷ Yet, in recent times, due to the scarcity of catch,

competition to buy landed fish for sale and the risk of being cheated after sponsoring fishing trips, some women boat owners stay on board the fishing boats to supervise and guard the catch to avoid losses.¹⁸ As processors and marketers, women engage in fish smoking, drying, salting, and packaging of fish and seafood for the market. They also buy fish products from fishermen and distribute or retail these products in local markets and urban centres. Others engage in further distribution and marketing by travelling around neighbouring countries to sell fish.¹⁹

In view of the above roles that women play in the Blue Economy and especially with regard to their contributions to the fisheries sector, maritime crimes in all its forms greatly affect women and their livelihoods. For instance, during the height of piracy and armed robbery attacks in the waters of Togo, Benin and Nigeria, women's livelihoods were affected by these activities and some lost their trading capital and incomes.

Due to the activities of armed robbers and bandits at sea, fishermen were unwilling to go to sea. As a result, women who had invested in fishing boats, nets and other fishing gears, could not get fish to sell to pay off loans from banks and financial institutions. Some of them ran into debts and went out of business.²⁰

Additionally, over exploitation of fish stock and illegal fishing by industrial fishing trawlers in territorial waters are also contributing to other maritime crimes, which impact women's sources of revenue in the artisanal fishing sector. Furthermore, along the coasts of Nigeria, Benin and Togo, armed robberies at sea sometimes targeted fishing boats and fishermen. Bandits at sea would attack boats, seize fish, nets, and other fishing gears from fishermen. These activities result in the loss of catch, fishing equipment, investments and thus, cripple livelihoods. Across coastal West Africa, women working in the Blue Economy make substantial contributions to employment creation, household support, food security, and sustaining livelihoods. Yet, they are almost invisible in the maritime economy. Their roles and contributions have not been fully

¹³Ifesinachi Okafor-Yarwood and Sayra van den Berg Bhagwandas, "Study: In Nigeria, Illegal Fishing is Linked with Crime and Piracy," *The Maritime Executive*, June 6, 2021, <https://maritime-executive.com/editorials/study-in-nigeria-illegal-fishing-is-linked-with-crime-and-piracy>

¹⁴Ernest O. Chuku et al., "Spotlighting Women-Led Fisheries Livelihoods Toward Sustainable Coastal Governance: The Estuarine and Mangrove Ecosystem Shellfisheries of West Africa," *Frontiers in Maritime Science* 9, (2022).

¹⁵Focus group discussion with leaders of Comité de gestion locale de pêche d'Aného, Aného, Togo, November 16, 2022.

¹⁶Interview with fisheries expert, Lagos, November 25, 2023.

¹⁷Interview with fisheries expert, Lagos.

¹⁸Interview with president of the Fédération Nationale des Unions Coopératives de Pêches du Togo (FENUCCOOPETO), Lome, November 18, 2022.

¹⁹Interview with member of Aného fishmongers cooperative, Aného, Togo, November 16, 2022.

²⁰Interview with fisheries expert and consultant, Accra, February 23, 2023.

examined and captured to understand the impact of maritime insecurity including maritime threats and criminality on their sources of revenue.

Understanding Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated Fishing

IUU fishing is a broad term that refers to a wide variety of fishing activities. IUU fishing in West Africa is characterized, inter alia, by activities such as illegal transshipment, fish ‘laundering,’ unauthorized fishing, gear use and/or prohibited techniques, excessive and/or prohibited bycatch, unauthorized or undeclared catches, and fishing in prohibited areas or during the prohibited seasons.²¹ IUU fishing is found in all types and dimensions of fisheries. It also occurs both on the high seas and in areas within national jurisdictions. It concerns all aspects and stages of the capture and utilization of fish, and it may sometimes be associated with organized crime.²² In most cases, the illegally caught fish in West Africa is often destined for European Union (EU) and Asian markets.²³ The problem is further compounded by the lack of efficient fisheries management systems and weak institutions in West Africa that allow foreign firms to exploit marine resources at a low cost. The forms of illegal fishing that are prevalent in the region include fishing by unlicensed foreign vessels, fishing in prohibited areas, fishing with illegal nets, and illegal transshipment at sea (which is called ‘Saiko’, particularly in Ghana).²⁴

Overfishing by illegal foreign and local actors has resulted in persistent low catch and plummeting fish stock in countries under this study; resulting in declining revenues and rising food insecurity. This is attributable to a lack of effective fisheries governance—legal, social, economic, and political arrangements used to manage fisheries and aquaculture in the region.²⁵ Fisheries governance mechanisms continue to advance the interest of the industrial sector, to the detriment of the small -scale fishers where most women are found.²⁶

IUU fishing is committed primarily by foreign and local actors. In this regard, both men and women are perpetrators with diverse roles. Women, in particular, engage in IUU fishing since they are predominantly involved in the fisheries value chain mainly as boat owners, processors and traders of fish stock. It is argued that about a quarter of all fishing in Africa is illegal²⁷ and women fish traders deal in catches from illegal fishing. In addition, local fisherfolk in collusion with Chinese vessels enable IUU fishing. There is also significant illegal transshipments at sea of large quantities of undersized juvenile pelagic species between industrial trawl vessels and local canoes in Ghanaian waters.²⁸ These stocks often end up in local markets where women dominate. Depleting fish stocks, due to illegal fishing mean that women fish traders do not differentiate the sources of fishes they get to sell whether from IUU fishing or other forms of legal fishing.²⁹

Women also contribute to other crimes in the maritime space, such as forced labour and human and child trafficking where migrant workers including children are subjected to extreme forms of human rights abuses and exploitation. Recent trends within the fisheries sector, including IUU fishing indicate a shift in sourcing workforce in developing countries where migrant workers are employed on big foreign fishing vessels at a relatively lower cost.³⁰ Women are part of brokers and recruitment agencies. Child trafficking and forced labour in fishing in West Africa are very prevalent. For instance, in Ghana, traffickers exploit children for forced labour in inland and coastal fishing such as the Volta Lake and other fishing communities.³¹ Some families willingly sell their children to traffickers for meagre sums of money as a result of poverty while others do so as a form of debt exchange.³² Children, especially boys, are forced to work in hazardous conditions; for example, in deep diving. Girls also perform work onshore, such as preparing the fish for markets. Furthermore, women and girls working

²¹Salihu and Danso, “Ensuring Effective Prosecution of Maritime Crimes in the Gulf of Guinea: A Focus on Côte d’Ivoire and Sierra Leone,” KAIPTC – Danish Maritime Security Project, March, 2022. <https://kaiptc-danishmaritimesecurityproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Ensuring-Effective-Prosecutin-of-Maritime-Crimes-in-th-GoG.-A-Focus-on-Cote-dIvoire-and-Sierra-Leone.pdf>

²²FAO, *International Plan of Action to Prevent, Deter and Eliminate Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated Fishing* (Rome: FAO, 2001).

²³FAO, *International Plan of Action*.

²⁴Salihu and Danso, “Ensuring Effective Prosecution.”

²⁵Ifeinachi Okafor-Yarwood et al., “Survival of the Richest, not the Fittest: How Attempts to Improve Governance Impact African Small-Scale Marine Fisheries,” *Marine Policy* 135, (2022).

²⁶Okafor-Yarwood et al., “Survival of the Richest.”

²⁷André Standing, “Criminality in Africa’s Fishing Industry: A Threat to Human Security,” *Africa Center for Strategic Studies – Africa Security Brief* no. 33, June 6, 2017, <https://africacenter.org/publication/criminality-africa-fishing-industry-threat-human-security/#author>

²⁸“Fighting Against Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated Fishing: Commission Notifies the Republic of Ghana with a Yellow Card,” European Commission, June 2, 2021, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_21_2745

²⁹Interview with fisheries expert, Accra, June, 2023.

³⁰“Caught at Sea: Forced Labour and Trafficking in Fisheries,” International Labour Organization, May 31, 2013, https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_norm/---declaration/documents/publication/wcms_214472.pdf

³¹Emma S. Hamenoo and Cynthia A. Sottie, “Stories from Lake Volta: The Lived Experiences of Trafficked Children in Ghana,” *Child Abuse & Neglect* 40, (2015): 103-112.

³²ILO, “Caught at Sea.”

in the fishing sector are vulnerable to sexual abuse and exploitation, including sex trafficking. Traffickers, including middlemen/women and relatives, recruit girls from other communities and subsequently exploit them in domestic servitude in the Lake Volta region, sometimes with their parents' knowledge.³³

Effects of Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated Fishing on the Livelihoods of Women in the Maritime Sector

The West African coastal region has long been regarded as one of the most fertile fishing regions on the globe. Fisheries stand out as a vital component of the surrounding ecosystem central to economic activities of most coastal communities in the region.³⁴ The fisheries sector provides the livelihood for millions of people in West Africa and remains a critical source of food security in the region. The contribution of the fisheries sector to the economies of countries in the region is being undermined by IUU fishing, which is depleting fish stocks and threatening livelihoods and the economic security of people in the GoG, generally.³⁵ West Africa has become one of the world's main locations for IUU fishing, with almost 40 per cent of the fish caught in the region taken illegally.³⁶ Some of the most sought after fish species, such as tuna, shrimp, sardinella, bonga, grouper, sole, and octopus, can be located in the region. Besides, the large number of natural harbours, the inexistence of chokepoints and good weather conditions make it an ideal shipping route and thus, making the GoG a prime location for IUU fishing.³⁷ IUU fishing severely compromises conservation efforts, undermines legitimate fishing competition and threatens the livelihoods of coastal communities generally, and women particularly. As alluded to earlier, IUU fishing has also become closely linked to other areas of organized crime including human trafficking, and smuggling of narcotics and weapons.³⁸

Moreover, contributions of small-scale fishing transcend their economic values to encompass social, relational and historical networks.³⁹ In many societies, fishing livelihoods are strongly gendered. Men are mostly associated with fishing from boats further from shore, and women with near-shore fishing, gleaning, processing, and marketing.⁴⁰ This sector is adversely affected by IUU fishing. Further, illegal fishing disproportionately affects women who constitute the majority of the labour force in the fisheries value chain in the GoG. For many women in this value chain, illegal fishing, coupled with the distress of reduced revenue from fisheries supply and food insecurity, increases their vulnerability due to unemployment, poverty, loss of livelihood, and malnutrition.⁴¹ As illegal fishing thrives, especially in onshore areas preserved for artisanal fishing communities, more women and children become greatly affected.⁴²

IUU fishing undermines the human security of coastal communities as it leads to less catch for fisherfolk. Reduction in catches affects the availability of fish for women to sell. This hampers the ability of women to meet the needs of their families and thus, increases their vulnerability. Over the last decade, the income accrued by small-scale fishers in West Africa plummeted by roughly 40 per cent due to depleting catch. Reduction in catches for local fisherfolk as a result of IUU fishing, also affect the amount of fish that is available to littoral communities for consumption and therefore, affect the nutritional needs of women and children in particular.⁴³

As noted earlier, women play a significant role in sustaining the sector by financing fishing activities. The small-scale fishing sector is highly vulnerable and women in small-scale fishing are further

³³U.S. Department of State – Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons, *2023 Trafficking in Persons Report: Ghana, 2023*, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2023-trafficking-in-persons-report/ghana/>

³⁴Edmund C. Merem et al., "Analyzing the Tragedy of Illegal Fishing on the West African Coastal Region," *International Journal of Food Science and Nutrition Engineering* 9, no.1 (2019): 1-15.

³⁵Salihu and Danso, "Ensuring Effective Prosecution."

³⁶Merem et al., "Analyzing the Tragedy."

³⁷Afua Lamptey and Frank Okyere, "The Political Economy of Maritime Piracy in the Gulf of Guinea: Dissecting the Kidnap for Ransom Menace," KAIPTC – Danish Maritime Security Project, March, 2022, <https://kaiptc-danishmaritimesecurityproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/The-Political-Economy-of-Maritime-Piracy-in-the-Gulf-of-Guinea.-Dissecting-the-Kidnap-for-Ransom-Menace-3.pdf>

³⁸Teale N. Phelps Bondaroff, Wietse van der Werf and Tuesday Reitano, "The Illegal Fishing and Organized Crime Nexus: Illegal Fishing as Transnational Organized Crime," *The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime*, April 16, 2015, <https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/the-illegal-fishing-and-organised-crime-nexus-1.pdf>

³⁹Raymond K. Ayilu et al., "Blue Economy: Industrialisation and Coastal Fishing Livelihoods in Ghana," *Reviews in Fish Biology and Fisheries* 33, (2023): 801-818.

⁴⁰Michael Fabinyi and Kate Barclay, *Asia-Pacific Fishing Livelihoods* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022).

⁴¹Edu-Afful, "Examining the Gendered Dynamics."

⁴²Edu-Afful, "Examining the Gendered Dynamics."

⁴³Ifesinachi M. Okafor-Yarwood, "The Cyclical Nature of Maritime Security Threats: Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated Fishing as a Threat to Human and National Security in the Gulf of Guinea," *African Security* 13, no.2 (2020): 116-146.

disadvantaged by the adverse effects of gender inequality.⁴⁴ For example, small-scale fishing operations contribute 80 per cent of locally produced fish and support the livelihoods of 24 million Nigerians. Seventy-three per cent of those involved in fisheries in Nigeria are women.⁴⁵ Similarly, in Togo, fishing employs about 9,000 fishermen and 12,000 fishmongers and directly supports about 150,000 people.⁴⁶ Most women in fishing communities are involved in the fishing business in diverse ways. Some are financiers of fishing boats used by the artisanal fishers and receive the catch from the men to sell.⁴⁷ Some of the women interviewed in Aneho, Togo, for instance, emphasized that due to the rise of IUU fishing they are not able secure substantial profits from their investments because of reduction in catch by local fisherfolk who do not possess the sophisticated equipment used by big fishing vessels engaged in IUU fishing.⁴⁸ Also, the majority of women who are engaged in the retail and processing of fish suffer adversely as they are compelled to buy fish at higher prices.⁴⁹ These problems make it impossible for women to meet the economic needs and food security of their families. They are often unable to pay for better education for their children as limited catch makes them economically insecure.⁵⁰

The processing and trading in small-scale fisheries have traditionally been female occupations. The role of women is significant because they add value to fresh fish through processing while distributing and preserving fish to ensure its availability long after the peak season as well as to consumers far from the landing beaches.⁵¹ However, women in some of the communities visited bemoaned that the decline in fish catches have resulted in increased competition from males. In some cases, fishers bypass them to sell the catch to former fishermen who may be better resourced to buy at higher prices. In certain cases, members of fishing crews who have lost their livelihoods because of declining fisheries have now become middlemen between fishermen and women

traders and processors. These former crew members exploit both their relational advantage with the fishers and their ability to travel out to sea to obtain the fish.⁵² This unfair competition affects women badly in the fish business.⁵³

Moreover, the increased competition for the dwindling resource of fish in some fishing communities in Nigeria, for example, has resulted in fisherfolk resorting to illegal fishing on the local scale, as a means of adapting to their changing environment and to secure livelihoods. Fisherfolk are engaged in some form of IUU fishing where they use illegal equipment or fishing gear and/or fish in restricted waters including beyond the permissible 5 nautical miles (nm). Some also work in cohort with industrial vessels who transship their illegal catches at sea.⁵⁴ Fishers have adapted their sources of income through both legal and illegal measures such as internal and external migration as well as fishing with explosives, poisonous substances, aggregating devices, and monofilament nets.⁵⁵

Fisherfolk in West Africa are also involved in people smuggling, and arms and drug trafficking as they seek alternative livelihoods. Illicit trade undermines economic security generally, and women are more likely to live in poverty. Trade in arms and drugs may facilitate or hide human trafficking into which women and girls are often lured.⁵⁶ People in coastal communities including women are also involved in the transshipment of stolen oil from bunkered oil rigs in the Niger Delta Region for example.⁵⁷ Some of these activities are very dangerous as they risk being injured or even killed by explosions. However, these fisherfolk do not consider their activities as illegal. This is partly because small-scale fisheries in West Africa are generally unregulated; without effective reporting systems of fishing activities.⁵⁸ Maritime crimes, such as robbery at sea, also affect fisherfolks, generally, and women, particularly. For instance, in Togo, fishers reported increased thefts of boat engines as a result

⁴⁴Ifesinachi M. Okafor-Yarwood et al., ““Ocean Optimism” and Resilience: Learning From Women’s Responses to Disruptions Caused by COVID-19 to Small-Scale Fisheries in the Gulf of Guinea,” *Frontiers in Marine Science* 9, (2022).

⁴⁵Okafor-Yarwood and van den Berg Bhagwandana, “Illegal Fishing.”

⁴⁶Kodjo N’Souvi et al., “Fisheries and Aquaculture in Togo: Overview, Performance, Fisheries Policy, Challenges and Comparative Study with Ghana, Mali, Niger and Senegal Fisheries and Aquaculture,” *Marine Policy* 132, (2021).

⁴⁷Focus group discussion with leaders of local fishmongers association, Aneho, Togo, November 16, 2022.

⁴⁸Focus group discussion with leaders of local fishmongers association.

⁴⁹Interview with president of fishermen’s union, Lome Fishing Port, November 19, 2022.

⁵⁰Okafor-Yarwood, “Cyclical Nature.”

⁵¹Gideon Sarpong, “How Fishers & Fishmongers Are Battling for Survival on the Frontier of Climate Change in Ghana,” Pulitzer Center, July 20, 2022, <https://pulitzercenter.org/stories/how-fishers-fishmongers-are-battling-survival-frontier-climate-change-ghana>

⁵²Ayilu et al., “Blue Economy.”

⁵³Interview with fisheries expert, Fisheries Society of Nigeria, Lagos, November 26, 2022.

⁵⁴Interview with fisheries expert, Fisheries Society of Nigeria.

⁵⁵Ayilu et al., “Blue Economy.”

⁵⁶Laura Burroughs et al., “Women in Maritime,” *One Earth Future – Secure Fisheries*, May 1, 2018, https://securefisheries.org/sites/default/files/2022-05/stable_seas_women_maritime_discussion_paper-V2.pdf

⁵⁷Interview with fisheries expert, Lagos State University, Lagos, November 26, 2022.

⁵⁸Okafor-Yarwood, “Cyclical Nature.”

of attacks on seas. Most of these boats are financed by women who sell fish. Such thefts have an effect on their incomes and ability to pay for loans secured to finance their economic activities.⁵⁹

National, regional and continental efforts have culminated into the adoption of legal mechanisms to deal with IUU fishing. These efforts have also resulted in the fragmentation of laws dealing with IUU fishing, which is not necessarily counter-productive as long as all parties coordinate by focusing and filling existing gaps rather than allowing overlaps in the laws.⁶⁰ Weak legal and governance frameworks together with inadequate political will at the national level, have been major obstacles to confronting illegal fishing in West Africa. The systemic illegalities in fisheries sectors alongside a severe lack of transparency impede the ability of countries to sustainably manage their marine fisheries and discharge their obligations under international fisheries law.⁶¹

There have been efforts at gender mainstreaming in the fisheries sector in Ghana, for instance. These efforts have succeeded in challenging gendered cultural norms about women's roles in fisheries.⁶² Nevertheless, existing regulatory mechanisms, albeit weak, tend to adopt a generic approach without necessarily paying attention to the gendered impacts on maritime crimes, like IUU fishing, on different genders. For example, at the national level, measures introduced by coastal states in the region with the intention of addressing depleting fish stocks, such as closed seasons, marine protected areas and anti-IUU fishing patrols, disproportionately affect small-scale fishers; undermining their rights and pushing them further into poverty. Furthermore, those along the value chain, such as processors and sellers, many of whom are women, are disproportionately impacted by these measures.⁶³

Conclusion

The maritime space is highly gendered in terms of roles played by men and by women. Women do play

significant roles in the Blue Economy in West Africa. The Blue Economy is generally being undermined by increasing crimes in the sector. The artisanal fisheries industry, in particular, provides substantial financial and food security to women who constitute the majority in the processing and selling of fish. IUU fishing, specifically, presents existential threats to states and peoples, though in varying degrees. For most women especially, who rely on the fisheries sector for their sources of income, the increasing spate of IUU fishing has severely undermined their economic fortunes, which has deeper effects on their societal and family responsibilities as well as their overall contribution to national growth. Given the severity of impacts of IUU fishing on coastal communities and on livelihoods, in general and on women, in particular, it is critical for states in the GoG to undertake detailed scrutiny of existing regulatory frameworks to ensure the specific needs of different genders are captured. It is essential for states to adopt a gender-responsive and human security approach, which can harness the potential of women in influencing behaviours and decision-making in their families and communities to bring about positive change in preventing and participating in maritime crime activities.

In a nutshell, it is essential for states to engage a gender-responsive and human security approach aimed at empowering women to stem the tide of maritime crimes by changing mind-sets, practices and policies within their families and their communities.

Recommendations

1. States in the GoG must intensify sensitization programmes on the effects of IUU fishing on human security and on livelihoods.
2. States must strengthen their capacities for monitoring and prosecuting illegal fishing in African waters.
3. Gender-responsive strategies should be incorporated into existing maritime and fisheries governance mechanisms.

⁵⁹Focus group discussion with leaders of local fishmongers association.

⁶⁰Namira Negm, "AU AIM Strategy and the Fragmentation of IUU Fishing Regulations in Africa: The Case of West Africa," *International Community Law Review* 22, nos. 3-4 (2020): 449-454.

⁶¹"Europe – A Market for Illegal Seafood from West Africa: The Case of Ghana's Industrial Trawl Sector," Environmental Justice Foundation, July 20, 2020, https://ejfoundation.org/resources/downloads/EJF_Europe-A-Market-for-Illegal-Seafood-from-West-Africa_2020_final.pdf; "Taking Stock: Online Transparency of Fisheries Management Information. 2023 Summary Assessment Report: Republic of Ghana," Fisheries Transparency Initiative, 2023, https://fiti.global/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/FiTI_GHA_TaSo_SummaryAssessmentReport_20230426.pdf

⁶²Elin Torell et al., "Assessing the Impacts of Gender Integration in Ghana's Fisheries Sector," *Coastal Management* 47, no. 6 (2019): 507-526.

⁶³Okafor-Yarwood, "Cyclical Nature."

4. Partnerships should be built to develop gender mainstreaming strategies that enhance women's participation and decision-making in maritime security issues.
5. Fisheries and other Blue Economy policies must recognize women as powerful agents of change and build capacities to contribute to preventing IUU fishing and other related maritime crimes.
6. Coastal communities and artisanal fishing associations should be supported with alternative livelihood programmes to boost coping mechanisms in the face of dwindling fish stock to, in turn, prevent engagement in maritime criminalities.

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About the Project

The five-year project on "Integrated Responses to Threats to Maritime Safety and Security in the Gulf of Guinea Maritime Domain in West and Central Africa (2022-2026)," is being implemented through three key approaches; namely—research, dialogue and capacity building. The project is primarily aimed at promoting a safer maritime security domain in the Gulf of Guinea. Knowledge-based products highlighting key maritime security issues are part of the research outputs in an effort to raise awareness at the policy, technical and operational levels. Overall, the project seeks to contribute to strengthened regional approaches to maritime security in the Gulf of Guinea through enhanced joined-up responses to shared threats.

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