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## **Role of Women in Fishery Activities in Some Coastal Communities of Rivers State, Nigeria**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Fisheries activities in 10 communities of Rivers State were investigated to determine the role of women in its development and sustainability. Two hundred structured questionnaires were randomly distributed in three communities (20 per community) across three Local Government Area of the State. The results from the study indicated that young and married women are actively involved in fisheries activities on part time basis, when compared to the older ones. In the study area, women are mainly involved in the marketing of fishery products than processing or active fishing. Women are more involved in picking of shell fishes such as oyster, periwinkle at low tide than fishing in creeks and rivers. Fish processing in these communities are done mostly by smoking using a standing oven which can dry a lot of fish at a time. The marketing strategies adopted by most women in selling their fishery products in the area are open market display and hawking, although, some sell their catch at landing jetties to buyers. Lack of credit facilities, poor transportation network and upsurge in criminal activities have been identified as major constraints facing women involvement in fishery activities in these areas. There is therefore, the need to empower the women fisher folks in these areas through granting of loans and credit facilities, capacity building, introduction of new technologies and improved transport network systems. These will go a long way in boosting fish production, improve their livelihood and enhance socio-economic status of the women fisher folks in the coastal communities.

**Key words:** Coastal area, women, fisheries, food, Rivers State

### **INTRODUCTION**

The fisheries sub-sector is a significant source of fish food and livelihood for many people living in the coastal communities, as it supplies animal protein necessary for growth and income for many households in these rural communities (Akinrotimi *et al.*, 2007). Women have been reported to play a vital role in fishery related activities around the world, especially in the coastal environment, where these activities are classified majorly in three ways; fishing, processing and marketing (Olufayo, 2012). Their role in food production, like coastal fishery has become more relevant as a way of reducing poverty and enhancing food security.

Worldwide, women in fishing communities have been observed to participate actively in fisheries and also play a part in the maintenance of their families (Nwabeze *et al.*, 2013). In many parts of the world, women have engaged actively in fish business. In the European countries for instance, women control 39% of the fish industry, making a huge amount of money for themselves

and their families (Aquilari, 2002). The crucial engagement of women in natural resources-based occupation such as fisheries in the rural communities has long been accepted but not recognized and not valued as men contribution (Obetta *et al.*, 2007).

However, fish production is customarily considered as masculine venture, women role in fish related activities is though supportive, is imperative and indispensable (Cliffe *et al.*, 2011a). However, their role is repeatedly being ignored and relegated, consequent of primordial systems of social setting, that is prevalent in the rural areas of many developing countries like Nigeria (Ibrahim *et al.*, 2011). Tamale (2004) reported that the non-recognition of women contribution in production process is enhanced by uneven allocation of resources. Therefore, lack of access and control over productive process is one of the major factors limiting women participation in economic activities such as coastal fishery practices (Acharya, 2003). Women in rural areas participate actively in the traditional fisheries sub-sector of the economy. They are either fully involved or play a complementary role for men in provision for their families. There is therefore the need to promote and to encourage women folk in this sector, so as to boost supply of food fish and improve the economic welfare of their families (IFAD, 2008; Ekpo, 2013).

Fisheries is an important activity, that is predominant in the coastal areas of Rivers State, the role of women in fisheries related activities in these areas are very crucial and critical to the overall economy of the state but policy maker usually overlook the important role that women play in fisheries activities. This study therefore, evaluates the role of women in coastal fisheries in some coastal communities of Rivers state as an important tool for boosting food security and improving the livelihood of the people in these communities.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

The study was conducted in 10 coastal communities namely Buguma, Ido, Abalama, Tema, Okpo and Ilelema (Asari Toru Local Government Area), Obuama and Degema (Degema Local Government Area); Abonnema and Obonoma (Akuku-Toru Local Government Area) all in Rivers State, Nigeria. These areas are surrounded by large water bodies and the vegetation in this area varies from mangrove to evergreen swamp forest. The prevailing climatic condition thus favours a thriving fishery activity.

Data was collected with the aid of structured questionnaires, following the method described by FAO (1999). It was distributed 20 per community, making it a total of 200 questionnaires. Questionnaires were administered only to female fisher folks and they were interviewed at mangrove swamps, jetties, fish landing spots, smoking hut, houses and market squares. The structured questionnaires were used to extract the socio-economic characteristics which include; age, marital status, household numbers, educational level, year of fishing experience, type of fishery activities and the constraints facing the fisher folks.

**Statistical analysis:** Completed questionnaire were collated and analyzed using descriptive statistical tool, involving the use of central tendency such as frequency, percentage and charts to explain the various variables of interest.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The results of the respondents in the study area indicated that women participation in fisheries activities increased greatly among the youths, within the age bracket of 20-40; with the highest percentage (32.5%) recorded in the age bracket of 31-40 (Fig. 1). A decreasing trend of

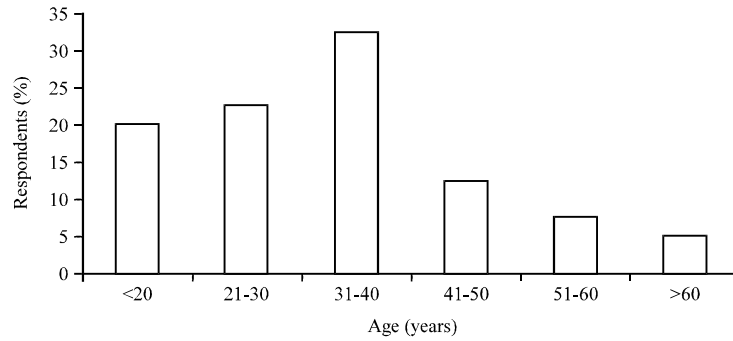


Fig. 1: Age distribution of women involved in coastal fisheries

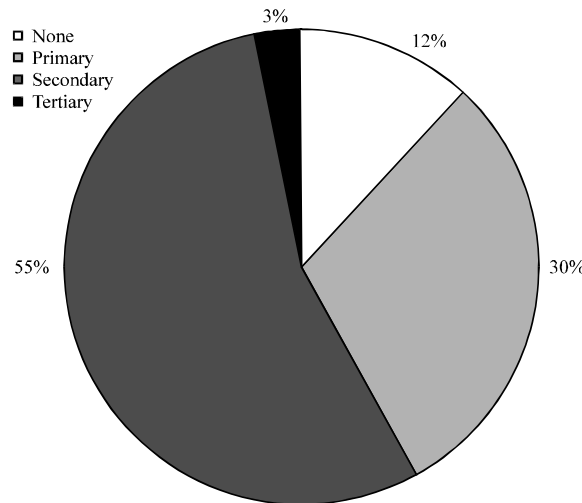


Fig. 2: Education status of women involved in coastal fisheries

participation was equally observed as the age of the women advanced, with the lowest (5.0%) in women above 60 years old (Fig. 1). This result is in line with that of Akinrotimi *et al.* (2011a) who observed same in some fishing communities of Niger Delta. This may be due to the fact, fishery activities are energy demanding jobs, so the women need to be physically strong to accomplish most of the tasks. The educational status of the women in this study revealed that most of them (55%) had secondary education and while a few of them (3%) had tertiary education (Fig. 2). This result confirms the one obtained by Williams (2006) that women from fisher communities are not well-read, with little or no education. Majority (54%) of the women interviewed in this study are married, about 40% are single, 4% are divorcee and 2% widowed (Fig. 3).

This results agrees with the findings of Nwabeze *et al.* (2013) in women participation in fisheries of Kainji Lake basin. They attributed the dominance of married women in fishery activities to an act of proactivity on the parts of the women in ensuring food security, generate income and reduced feminine vulnerability within the family. The fisheries activities engaged by women folk in the study area is shown in Fig. 4. From the results, it was discovered that most women (55.0%) engaged in marketing, 30% of them in active fishing while 15% served as middlemen between active fishers and buyers and 10% were involved in fish processing. This result corroborated that of Odulate *et al.* (2011) who reported a similar trend in the coastal wetland areas of Ogun state,

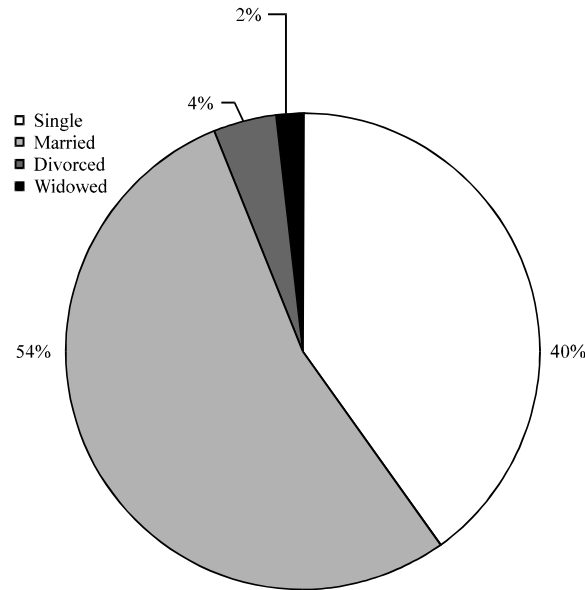


Fig. 3: Marital status of women respondents

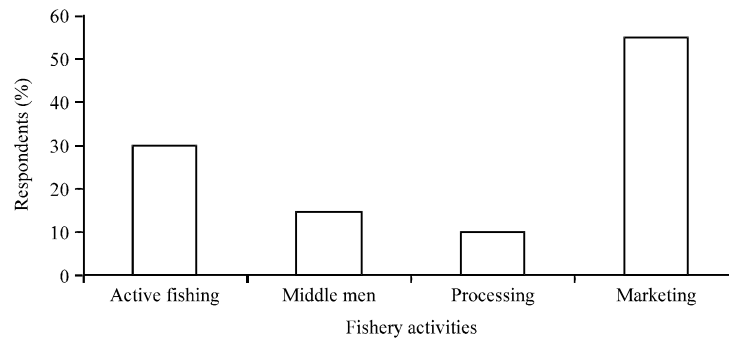


Fig. 4: Fisheries activities engaged by women fisherfolk

Nigeria, observed that women are more involved in fish marketing than other fishery activities. Considering the type of fishing activities engaged by women fisher folk in this study, majority (50%) of the women engaged in picking of shell fish while 40 and 10% participated in setting of traps fishing in creeks/rivers, respectively, with zero percent observed in deep sea fishing (Fig. 5). This result corroborated that of Akinrotimi and Edun (2011) who reported that women in the coastal area of Rivers State are actively involved in picking of shell fishes, such as periwinkle, oyster and clam. From this study, engagement of women is limited to the creeks and rivers, it is forbidden for women to be involved in deep sea fishing in the coastal area of Niger Delta (Akinrotimi *et al.*, 2006). Figure 6 shows that most of the women (50%) had eleven to twenty years experience, only 2% had above forty years. This result followed this trend, since most of the fisher women are in their youthful age.

The reasons for the fisher women involvement in coastal fisheries activities is shown in Fig. 7 (62%) of respondents are engaged in coastal fisheries to meet their daily needs, such as feeding, taking care of their children and lending a helping hand to support their husbands.

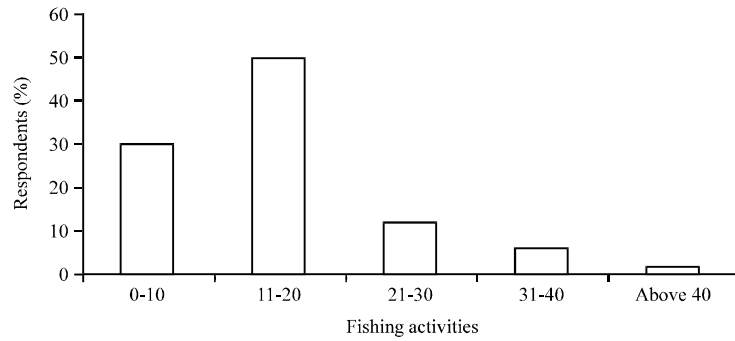


Fig. 5: Type of fishing activities engaged by women fisher folk in coastal area of Rivers state

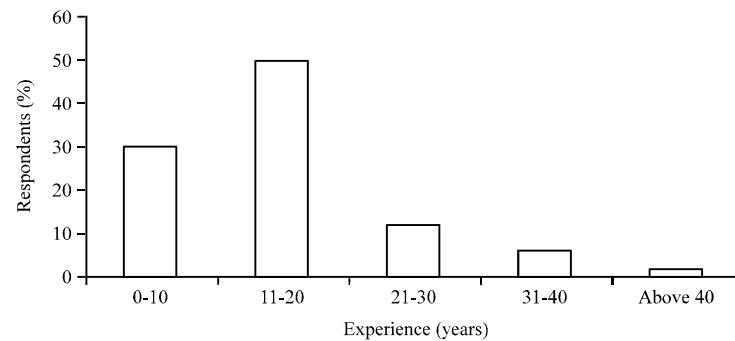


Fig. 6: Experience of the women in fishery activities

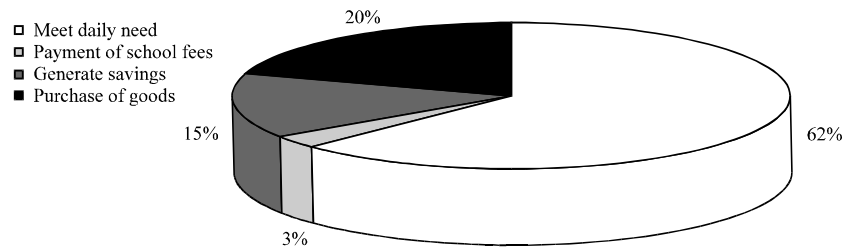


Fig. 7: Respondents reasons for their involvement in coastal fishery activities

The desire to purchase goods for sale (20%) is closely followed by their propensity to generate savings (15%) and lastly by their aspiration to pay school fees. This is in line with the findings of Cliffe *et al.* (2011b), in some rural communities of Niger Delta. They attributed the main reason for women participation in fisheries to their longing to meet their daily needs. The reason why school fees recorded low response may be due to free education scheme of the State Government.

The mode of operation of women fisher folks in the coastal area of Rivers state indicated that 65% of women are engaged in fishery business on part time basis while 27% on full time and 8% does it occasionally (Fig. 8). This result agrees with the findings of Akinrotimi *et al.* (2011b) in the same study area. The reason may be due to declining returns from artisanal fisheries being witnessed in recent times. There is the need for them to diversify. As livelihood diversification according to Cochrane *et al.* (2009) is a veritable means of risk transfer and reduction in the level of burden in times of crisis.

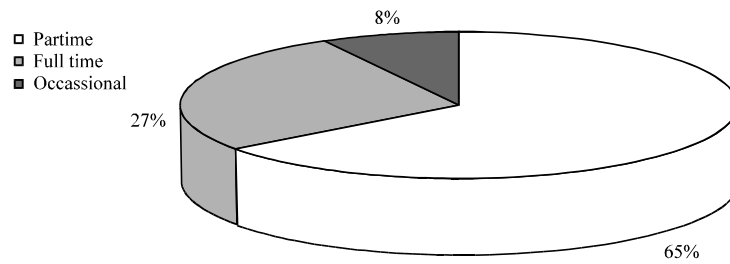


Fig. 8: Mode of operation of women fisher folks in the study area

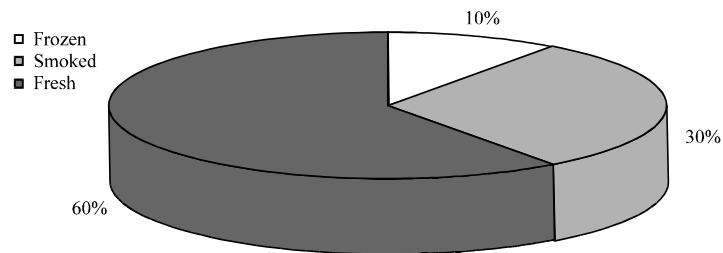


Fig. 9: Forms of fish presentation for sale in the study area

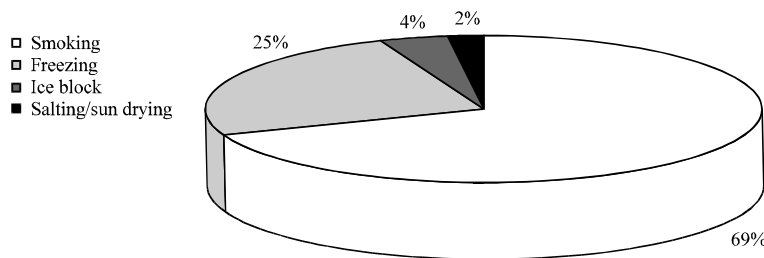


Fig. 10: Fish processing and preservation methods normally practiced by fishers in the area

Fish were normally sold daily in fresh form (Fig. 9), this is because the people in these communities have a preference for fresh fish when compared to smoked and frozen fish (Fig. 9). The fish processing and preservation methods majorly (69%) being utilized in the area is smoking (Fig. 10), smoked fish are highly preserved and can easily be transferred to urban centers for sale.

Different types of ovens used for smoking fish, include standing oven, mud oven, full drum and half drum oven (Fig. 11). Use of drum oven full or half is not popular in the area which could be as a result of salty nature of the environment which may lead to rusting of the metallic materials (Akinrotimi *et al.*, 2009). All the respondents in the area make use of standing oven in smoking their fish products. This may be due to large quantities of fish being handled at a time. The marketing strategies used in selling fish products in the area are open market display (41%), hawking (32%), direct purchase from fish landing sites (26%) and packaging (1%) (Fig. 12). Most of the women employed open market display to sell their fish while some engaged in hawking; others sell at landing site as they are returning from fishing activities.

The major constraints and limitations confronting women participation in fisheries in these coastal communities as depicted in Fig. 13, include lack of finance (48%), poor transportation network (18%) criminal activities (25%), lack of fishing gears, lack of cooperative society and neglect

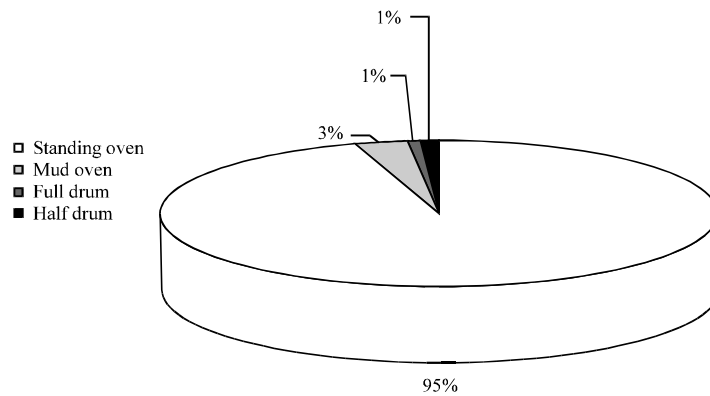


Fig. 11: Type of oven used by women fisher folk in the study area

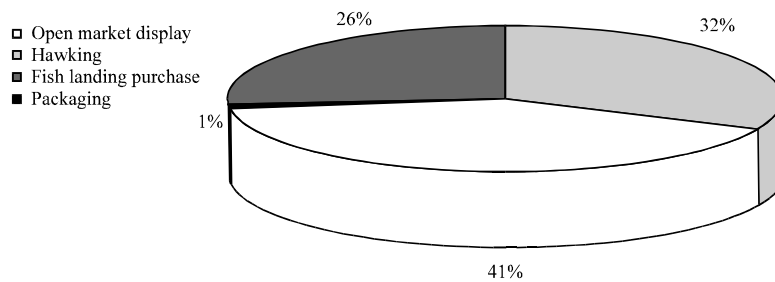


Fig. 12: Marketing strategies of fishery products in the study area

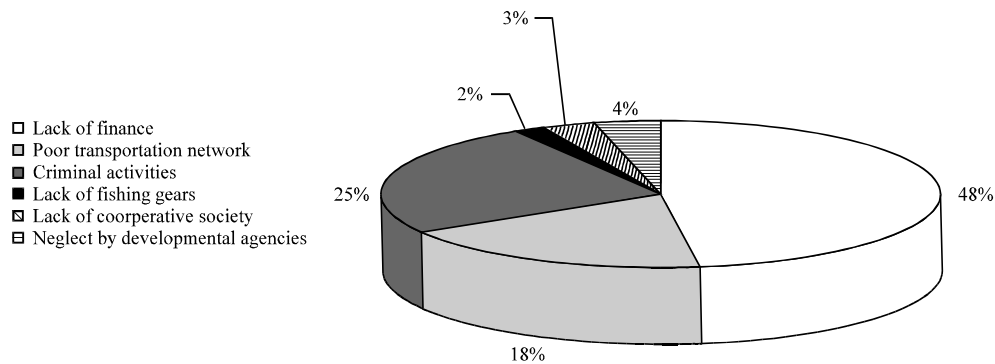


Fig. 13: Constraints facing women fisher folks in the study area

by developmental agencies, such as Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC). Akinrotimi (2012), accessed to availability of finance are major constraints limiting the expansion of fisheries in Niger delta region and women in fishing communities have difficulty in securing credit facilities from banks and financial institutions compared to men in the same community. The upsurge of criminal activities in the area in recent times has stimulated fear in some of the women fisher folks, many are afraid of venturing into active fishing, for fear of being attacked.

## CONCLUSION

Even though women play a vital role in fisheries activities in the 10 coastal communities in Rivers State, their roles have not been given its proper place like men. Women are involved in



fisheries in order to generate revenue that will uphold family values, using marketing and processing of fish which is crucial to enhancing nutritional values and food security. Women should be encouraged to participate fully in fisheries activities by establishing cooperative society; providing soft loans and enhancing their skills through more participatory extension programme.

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