

ACTIVITIES OF FISHMEAL AND FISH OIL PLANTS AND THEIR CONSEQUENCES ON WOMEN FISH WORKER

FOCUS ON THE GAMBIA

1. Geographical Location of The Gambia

The Gambia is one of the smallest countries in West Africa. It is surrounded on land and sea by Senegal and the Atlantic Ocean. The country is located on **13, 28⁰ N and 16, 34⁰ W**. The land area dimension is **11,300km** square with a population of **2.2 million** (Gambia Bureau of Statistics).

Since this article focuses on fisheries, it important and logical to provide an overview of the sector, specifically artisanal fisheries sub-sector. The fisheries sector is divided into two sub-sector. The artisanal fishery sub-sector and industrial fishery sub-sector. The artisanal fishery is engaged in relatively low fishing inputs and labor intensive fishing practices and they utilize assorted fishing gears and methods such as entangling gillnets comprising surface and bottom nets, hooks and line and long lines, traps. They fish both in fresh, marine and brackish water regimes.

The industrial fishery sub-sector is more technically sophisticated in their fishing operations and they target high value fish, demersal fish such as sole fish, shrimps, snappers, cuttlefish and octopus. Majority of the vessels are foreign owned. There is also fishery jetty for these vessel to land their catches but its carrying capacity becomes a question in terms of its accommodating many and large vessels at the same time.

2. Importance of the Fisheries Sector

The fisheries sector contributes to affordable nutritional intake, employment creation, foreign exchange earnings, bilateral and multilateral cooperation, but this importance is continually being infringed by habitats destruction, pollution from industrial (fishmeal and fish oil, tourism, maritime fishing, etc) and residential, illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing, and overfishing. These infringements are the result of weak governance, weak enforcement of regulations and corruption.

3. The Role of Women in the Artisanal Fisheries Sub-sector

Women in the Gambia dominate the post-harvest sector and primarily engaged in processing (smoking and drying) and marketing of fresh fish. The major fish used in their operations are Sardinella, bonga, catfish and other high values fish such as shrimps. For many years majority of women would get up as early as 4:00am on a daily basis and travel fish landing sites to buy Sardinella (round and flat) and Bonga, because it is easily accessible, affordable and available as well as consumption preference for most Gambians. Additional roles played by women are; pre-financing fishing trips, by providing fuel, food, fishing nets, etc, discharging of fish (Sardinella, Bonga) when fishing canoes land. They are also well organized into associations and have agreed to help in the fight against juvenile landing, by rejecting any juvenile landed by fishermen. They are also engaged in small micro-finance schemes, by contributing on weekly basis. More importantly, women are particularly responsible for education, feeding and Medicare of their children.

4. Activities of Fishmeal and fish oil Industries

For the past five years, the Gambia have witnessed the intrusion of three fishmeal plants located in Gunjur, Sanyang and Kartong that are closed/within artisanal fish landing sites. The major fish species utilized for fishmeal and fish oil are the round and flat Sardinella and Bonga. These plants were given approval by government, and sadly unable (Department of Fisheries) to monitor their activities in terms of quantity of fish they process and the foul stench and the emission of smoke within fish landing sites as well as waste water pollution they inject into the marine waters.

For many Gambians, particularly women, these fishmeal plants are threatening their economic and social survival in terms of stable jobs, health, access to fish for marketing, thereby reducing their incomes. They further impact negatively the Tourism industry which is the main employer and foreign exchange source for Gambia, with most European visitors attracted by the white, sandy beaches and beach-front hotels.

Despite claims that these plants provide employment to Gambians there is lack of data and information on employment as per employment standards (salaries, employment letters, health insurance, insurance, social security payments, etc,) laid down by the government of the Gambia.

Illegal contract arrangements, meaning fishmeal operators go to Senegal and hire fishermen to fish for them in Gambian waters, particularly in Sanyang and Gunjur. They pre-finance them by building fishing canoes measuring up 30 meters, outboard engines, fishing nets and fuel. This is illegal as due process is not followed. Prize schemes is also introduced in Gunjur, and provision of housing within the premises of fishmeal plants in Sanyang to those in contract arrangements.

5. Consequences of Fishmeal and Fish oil Plants on women Fish worker

The consequences of fishmeal plants on women fish workers can be categorized as social, economic, and health.

Socially, these plants distort the social cohesion as limited access to fish would lead to women moving to other fish landing sites where fishmeal plants do not exist. This is true because of the above mentioned contract arrangements, stipulating mandatory supply of fish to the plants.

Economically, the high cost of fish and competition between fishmeal plants and women leads to difficulties for women to buy the fish and be able to sell at daily markets. This means their income becomes minimal and eventually disable their effectiveness to pay for the school fees of the children, feeding and medical care.

The foul stench and smoke fishmeal plants inject would impact on the health of women, who spend 18 hours on daily basis processing their fish for marketing the following day.

According to a pelagic woman fish processor i interviewed, she said **“now I can’t even give my neighbors fish for free as i used to, because of the high cost of fish and access problem”**

Another women noted that “even the quantity of Sardinella and Bonga I used to cook for lunch at my house is drastically reduced, because of overfishing, bad quality, and juvenile landing which are all consumed by fishmeal plants. She further added that even my cats at home wouldn’t have left-over fish these days.

In conclusion, the mushrooming of these fishmeal and fish oil plants and considering their negative impacts, there is an urgent need for multi-institutional approach that would closely monitor their activities. The Department and Ministry of Fisheries must take the leading role, seconded by the Ministry of Environment and Climate Change, Ministry of Trade and Ministry of Justice. Justice Ministry is key because fisheries and aquaculture are underpinned by binding and non-binding international instruments, particularly United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.