



Foto: Aliou Diallo, Mbour

"Educating and empowering women and families is what I really have wanted to do my whole life"

A talk about willpower, responsibility, and self-confidence

The interview with Kenyan Mercy Wasai Mghanga took place during a conference of CAOPA (African Confederation of Professional Organizations of Artisanal Fisheries) in Mbour on the Atlantic coast of Senegal in November 2021. The gathering of representatives from many African countries is being organized every year to celebrate the annual World Fisheries Day, on November 21.

Mercy travelled from Mombasa to the CAOPA conference, where she is representing CONCA, a non-profit environmental civil society organization operating in Kenya since 2017. In her speeches, she strongly advocated for women's equality in the fisheries sector. On the occasion of International Women's Day on March 8, we do publish this interview with her, a politically active woman who opened up new perspectives to many women in her country in a powerful and inspiring way.

Cornelia Wilss: Please tell us about where you grew up!

Mercy Wasai Mghanga: I belong to the Taita and grew up in a rural area in Kenya. In a family that never had enough to provide for themselves. My father had not been able to find work. After primary

school, I had to leave school because my parents could not afford the school fees. There were nine children at home that my mother had to take care of. I was the second child at home. Can you imagine what it's like to be raised in a family where no one has attended school over a longer period of time or can't write or read? My father was illiterate, and he never thought there was any value in spending money on women's education. He expected me to find someone from whom the whole family could benefit, and he was eager to marry me off. But I had a mind of my own and I did not want to get married yet. As a young girl, I think, I already knew that I never wanted to live in the same conditions as my mother and suffer as she did. That's why I wasn't ready to get married then. I was always used to working around the house. At first, I did laundry for other people, then I found a job as a housemaid.

For how long did you do this?

Only for a year. This woman abused me. I worked from 5:00 am to 11:00 pm and had a lot of work. Imagine, I was 16 years old at the time! I decided to look around for something else. A friend of mine was a successful businesswoman who could teach me how to run a business. First, for six months, I sold peanuts. After some time, I teamed up with an other woman who sold fish to tourists and hotels on the beach in Mombasa. She knew I had some money put aside in the bank and she encouraged me to set up my own business. So, I did. But then she disappeared with my money, and I was bankrupt. So, I had to take a loan from someone else. On a good day I earned up to 20,000 Kenyan shilling (about 160 Euro). Trading with fish became my passion.

Did you have a business plan?

My business plan was to support my family. I paid the school fees for my younger siblings, and I bought food for my family. I did that for about three years.

That was a huge responsibility ...

Yes, I took responsibility for taking care of my family and supporting them. After that, I decided to get married.

Yeah. You decided to get married!

Yes [*laughs*]. I met a man who loved me. He was working in a hotel at the time. But he wanted me to take care of the kids and stop working. I stayed at home for a year, but my family again suffered a lot from poverty during that time. There had been conflicts with my husband's family. They did not want me to earn my own money as a fishmonger. One day my mother-in-law told me to get the divorce if I really wanted to work. "I will not allow you in my house any longer, because I know that fishmongers prostitute themselves." But I did not obey her orders, I took my two children and moved away from my husband's family.

Then I worked, raised my children, repaid my debts, and built a big house. Well, my husband returned, and we negotiated the terms (*laughs*) to stay together. I mean, I told him that I will never give up working and earning my own money. It wasn't easy because I had defied the traditional rules. We belong to different faiths. He is a Muslim, I am a Christian. Until today we live together. And I am grateful to earn my money by selling fish. It is a good job. One of my brothers is now working in Qatar. My first son also lives and works abroad. He is working in Saudi Arabia for an oil company, my second child is a girl. She is living in Italy. My youngest child lives in Brasil. Even though my children live far away from me, we keep in close contact. When they have time, on holidays, they always visit their parents.



Dorcas Malogho (right in the pic) with Mercy Wasai Mghanga, fish trader at coastal women in fisheries

How do you organize the fish trade? Isn't it hard to go to the landing side every day and buy fish?

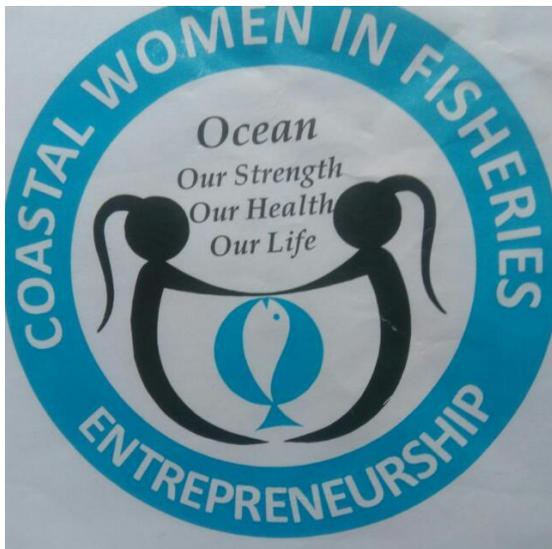
Sometimes it is hard. You know, there are sexual assaults on the women who are working in the ports, also here in Kenya. Some of the guys take advantage of naive young women. They promise them that they will get the fish for free or that they will give an extra portion of fish to the young ladies - for the family, as they say. But everybody knows that such men don't give anything for free. They come for something in return. Once, I decided not to go to the landing side at all anymore. It's like I'm the one paying them, isn't it? I have told the fishermen, if you want to make a deal, you must come to my house. In the meantime, I bought ten large freezers that have enough capacity, and a filleting machine that does good service. I started to process the fish at home and have become a successful businesswoman.

How did you manage that?

I process snapper, lobster, oysters, squid and octopus and calamari. Meanwhile, I am the supplier that delivers the most volume of fish in my area. My fish is delivered to hotels, supermarkets, local fish stores, and I employ ten women to work for me. The women clean the fish, fillet it in portions (200 grams for example) and freeze the portions. Depending on the order, I defrost the portions and sell them - to restaurants and hotels. My customers love fresh fish (in Kenya, fish is not smoked) and pay a good price for it.

At the same time, you are training women in the fishing business, don't you?

Yes. Together with other women from our sector, I have founded my own company, which is officially registered. Our label is "Coastal women in fisheries entrepreneurship limited" since 2019 under the Kenya Company's Act 2015.



Who are you and what are you doing?

The group consists of 120 women who are members of the various Beach Management Units (BMU) from the counties in coastal Kenya, namely Taita Taveta, Kilifi, Lamu, Tana River, Kwale and Mombasa. There are also members under the umbrella body for BMUs along the Coast, Indian Ocean Water Body (IOWB) and Tuna Fisheries Alliance of Kenya (TuFAK). They are involved in the trade of fish and fishery products predominantly from the Small Scale Fisheries Sector. There is one group of the women who get fish from the landing sites and fry and sell it, popularly known as “Mama Karanga”, other women get fish from landing sites and supply to hotels, companies, and shops. These women are boat owners.

Where did the idea come from?

The idea to form a women group in fish trade was born from the trainings that the women attended as members of the BMUs from their respective counties and the fisheries association. The trainings were

on fisheries governance and fisheries development. The trainings were organized by the State Department for Fisheries, governmental fisheries and development programs in the region, and others organized by civil society organisations (TuFAK, CANCO, SMARTFISH Program, FAO and WWF). In the trainings the issue of gender was highlighted and the need of mainstreaming gender in fisheries to align the sector to be in compliance with human rights laws including the Kenyan constitution. The training addressed the entire value chain and issues that arise as part of further processing and trade (post-harvest).

Which issues are you discussing in the workshops?

The contribution of women is not recognized. We want to change that. For the recognition of women there should be investment in appropriate infrastructure, organizational structures, and appropriate capacity development of the post-harvest sub sector. This will create opportunities for value addition, reduce post-harvest loss, and bring about non-discrimination of trade in fishing, and-mainstream gender in fisheries.

It was that recognition that the women decided to start the group of women in fish business in Coastal Kenya and organized the first meeting in 2018. In the meeting these women elected their representatives and developed their constitution.

But your engagement goes beyond that, doesn't it? You are also a life coach for the women?

Let me tell you a short story: Some time ago I went to the governor of Mombasa County and told him that about 1700 women were working in fish processing in his jurisdiction. The women, I tried to explain to him, need support from the state because they are being sexually abused. This is also very dangerous because HIV/Aids is spreading out more and more due to the sexual contacts. I managed to get a little start-up capital for the women and trained them in small groups in what they can do to build a better future for themselves. Let me give you two examples: In Kenya, there is a shortage of water, even in the tourist areas. Therefore, I bought large tanks. Now the women who live and work on the beach sell fresh fish and bottles of water, which is brought to Mombasa from outside in large trucks. You know, access to water is very difficult in some areas of Kenya. For another group of women, I bought chairs and tents that they now lend out for wedding parties. Coming from a poor family myself, I know how it feels when one's family is not doing well. That's the driving force to do so many things. I haven't forgotten where I come from. It's not so much about the money. It's about ideas and courage!

My experience is that women are seen as the weaker sex by fishermen and in our society, which is reinforced by cultures and customs based on gender discrimination. However, there are also good signs: Women are beginning to fight for their rights. I try to make women more independent in financial issues and give them further training in money management. They then get their own bank account and their own earned money. Some of them I lend money to build up their business if I am

really convinced of their idea. Not large sums, so they don't get into too much debt, and they can pay me back in small amounts over a longer period. I also leave them a portion to provide for their children.

[Does that mean that you and the women also work in completely different business areas?](#)

Yes, of course. We have set up women's community networks. Among ourselves, by the way, we always speak in Kiswahili. I can come to as many women as possible, show them how they can set up a small business profitably. For example, along with fish processing, some women are now doing poultry farming. And we have started aquaculture in rural areas. And recently, some women's communities in Kenya have started growing up mangroves. They raise the seedlings in salt water and sell the plants to the government, which is funding mangrove forest ecosystem programs for coastal protection. We get one hundred Kenyan shillings for one plant. When the women wait for the fishing boats to land in the port in the morning, they use the time and put mangrove seedlings in plastic bags, for example, until they can be planted out later. Why not make use of the time? There are other women, but I also see more and more fishermen among them, who started to grow different vegetables, for example tomatoes, spinach, cabbage, maize and fruits. To get honey, bees have also been kept in the mangrove trees for some time. You see, in Kenya we are trying to do gardening so that we do produce healthy food for ourselves.



Training of women and men from the fisheries sector in Kenya

Where do you get the knowledge for the different things you do?

I have participated in many different seminars and travelled to many countries like Tanzania, Mauretania, The Gambia, Mauritius, The Seychelles, Thailand etc. From everywhere I have brought back new ideas. Currently, I also organize workshops to educate fishermen understanding the challenges of marine protected areas. It is a philosophy that has accompanied my whole life: I have always tried to educate myself and to pass on my experience to others.



Workshop with fishermen

What is your secret? Why are you so successful with everything you touch?

I believe in myself. And I believe that God helps me. If you believe in God and pray, anything is possible. That is my experience and conviction. One morning, I woke up and thought, why don't people in Kenya eat fish? I must start an "Eat more fish campaign". We formed a group of 15 active women to spread the idea, and the government found out about it at some point. Do you know what happened? The president of Kenya, the prime minister, and other government officials, including the director in charge of the governmental agency for fisheries, came to me, at my house in Mombasa and we prepared the fresh fish for them and ate with them.



The Kenyan President on the occasion of the "Eat more fish campaign"

Today, the government is supporting the "Eat more fish campaign", encouraging farmers to grow more fish and consumers to eat more fish. They picked up on my involvement as a positive example of Blue Economy. For me, it was another step for lobbying and advocacy work to improve the incomes and supply of healthy food in poorer households, mostly in rural areas.

What do you see as the biggest challenges for women in the fisheries sector?

Women in post-harvest trade have been in Kenya for a long time working individually and were not organized collectively in trade. They have little access to markets, to trade information and to credit facilities. Currently their market is limited and characterized by low prices. There is need for the women to come together to diversify their markets. The government has organized all stakeholders at the landing site in form of BMUs for purposes of sustainable marine conservation and development. These Beach Management Units have different committees for instance on trade and business. However, this has not worked collectively to improve the trade of fish in the various Beach Management Units. This remains a challenge!

Do you sometimes have doubts about being able to do all that you do furthermore?

Today I'm 50 years old, and I have been working since I was 15 years old. I come to do my part so that no woman must suffer more because she is a woman! On the contrary! Allow me to say one thing about Africa. When you give women education, it means empowering the whole family. When I have money, I give it to my people. I know that my work has an impact on women's livelihoods. Educating and empowering women and families is what I really have wanted to do my whole life. I'm happy and grateful to be able to do that.

Mercy, thank you for your time!