Exploring gender and food taboos in fisheries of the Global South

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Food taboos are often seen as a way to preserve cultural identity and create a sense of belonging among people living in some communities. Our study explores gender dimensions of food taboos in the context of fisheries in the Global South.

Taboos are understood to be religious activities or rituals designed to make supernatural creatures produce or prevent specific results. These rituals are often used in combination with specific plants or animals, or in certain areas as a way to avoid overexploitation or destruction of natural resources. These taboos, then, can serve as a mechanism for resource management, conservation and human health (Kajembe et al. 2003). Such taboos are often linked to cultural perceptions, practices and beliefs about human health hazards (Oloko et al. 2013; 2021; 2022).

Dietary taboos are used in relation to specific life phases or events of humans such as menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth and lactation, sickness, and mourning (Colding and Folke 2001). Often, tribes or families that have placed a taboo on a specific fish species are not permitted to consume or capture that species, which thereby influences people's eating habits and diets (Meyer-Rochow 2009). Food taboos can change over a person's lifetime as observed in some parts of the Global South. For example, food taboos have been observed in Malaysia's Orang Asli tribe, Nigeria's midwest, and parts of the Congo (Meyer-Rochow 2009). Food-related taboos can also vary by gender, with some taboos restricting fisherwomen from consuming certain foods, while other taboos focus on men and the foods that they harvest. For example, pregnant fisherwomen in Nigeria's Ishan, Afemai and Isoko divisions are strictly prohibited from consuming marine and freshwater snails in order to avoid causing unnecessary salivation in newborns. Fishermen are are likewise forbidden from consuming snails in areas such as the Urhobo and Ika divisions of Nigeria because it is believed that eating them reduces a man's strength during fishing and wars (Meyer-Rochow 2009; Ekwochi et al. 2016). Gender-specific food taboos such as these can lead to gender-differentiated nutrition and health outcomes, yet this has received limited attention in gender and fisheries literature and associated studies (Chakona and Shackleton 2019).

Food taboos are known in almost all human societies as an institutionalised set of rules that govern the consumption of certain foods (Chakona and Shackleton 2019). These regulations frequently target pregnant women fisherfolk in order to prevent what are perceived to be harmful effects of these foods on newborns. Pregnant women, for example, are usually prohibited from consuming the richest food sources containing iron, carbohydrates, animal proteins, and micronutrients in Ethiopia, Gambia, Nigeria, Gabon, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (Chakona and Shackleton 2019). This is primarily due to concerns that: 1) the child will develop bad habits after birth; 2) will be born with diseases; 3) women will experience delayed labour due to certain foods causing women to give birth to large babies; and 4) certain foods will cause continuous menstruation and result in infertility (Chakona and Shackleton 2019). For example, women in Madagascar are prohibited from consuming a specific species of eels during pregnancy because it could induce miscarriage or multiple births (Jones et al. 2008).

Fishermen have fewer food taboos to adhere to than women, but some male-targeted taboos do exist, such as those based on religious values, which might have a health-related basis. Men may be restricted from eating certain foods and may be an expression of male superiority or differences in skills between both sexes.

In Papua New Guinea, a fisherman who intends to go shark fishing must not only refrain from sexual activity for a while but also fast, pray and drink a huge amount of saltwater. It is strictly prohibited for fishermen to consume fish species such

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as flatfish and stingrays before going fishing (Meyer-Rochow 2009). Related to this is alcohol consumption. When going out to fish, coastal fishermen are not allowed to drink alcohol. This taboo stems from the Islamic belief that drinking alcohol makes the body impure (Shilabukha 2015). If a fisherman is suspected of drinking alcohol, he is not allowed to participate in fishing activities in order to avoid misfortune and other hazards while fishing. This helps to reduce overfishing and helps enable fish to spawn, produce young, and grow to maturity. The result is that this taboo also serves as a conservation strategy.

Among fisherfolk in north coastal Kenya, *bocho* (stonefish species) is considered to be a bad omen and signifies ill luck or misfortune if it is consumed (Shilabukha 2015). Certain fish species, on the other hand, can be avoided for a variety of plausible reasons, not just dietary ones. One reason is that some animals are considered "unclean". In northeastern Madagascar, toxins have been discovered in some marine animals such as turtles, eels, sharks and certain saltwater fish, and so are considered taboo foods for both men and women (Golden and Comaroff 2015).

Certain animal species, such as marine and freshwater snails, are also respected and given strict protection by some cultures in Nigeria, and may not be touched, killed or eaten (Ntiamoa-Baidun 2008). This is a very common practice among fishermen of the Gas and Ewes ethnic groups in Adaklu, Ghana. At the Tocantins River in Brazil, it is prohibited to consume certain foods, such as fish. These are known as *carregado* or *reimoso* fish. *Carregado* is a term used by fishing communities throughout Brazil, and refers to fish that are thought to exacerbate illness or cause wounds, inflammation, and other health issues when eaten by fisherfolk (Begossi, unpubl. data).

Gender-specific food taboos can have an impact on the health and nutrition of vulnerable women fisherfolk in the Global South because women are often subjected to different degrees of nutritional stress, which increase their chances of developing a range of negative health issues and outcomes. This can be minimised, however, by educating and encouraging fisherfolk, especially women, to consume a diverse and healthy diet with essential micronutrients such as those derived from a variety of fish. Women-oriented nutritional intervention programmes should also be developed and implemented in Global South fishing communities to overcome these vulnerabilities that jeopardise their wellbeing and development. Fishermen are subject to fewer food taboos than women, suggesting that in communities where taboos are upheld, men have far more access to healthy foods. Even though avoiding certain fish may be a good idea due to health threats or as a strategic measure to conserve fisheries resources, it is uncertain – and possibly unscientific or unethical – to restrict all people from consuming fish containing essential nutrients. This situation tends to reflect a culture in which food taboos are imposed in favour of certain groups – the strongest or dominant group, to the detriment of those who are already vulnerable or marginalised.

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