



A qualitative assessment of structural drivers of fish for sex, and teenage marriages:

Strengthening collective action to mainstream gender and address the structural drivers of fish for sex, HIV/AIDS, and teenage marriage

9th Global Conference on Gender in Aquaculture & Fisheries (GAF9)

AIT - Thailand, October 3, 2025

Arthur M Moonga, Jennifer Gee, Matteo Luzzi, Maria M Hambulo, Romeo Chayang'a, Mwansa Mungela, Masiliso Phiri, Alba DelRioPoza



Background

- **Small-scale fishing and poverty:** Fishing households rely on fish that are becoming fewer and harder to catch. Men dominate fishing, while women are largely confined to processing and trading.
- **Women disproportionately affected:** They earn less, have limited decision-making power, and face higher economic vulnerability.
- **Risky coping strategies:** Fish-for-Sex (FFS) exchanges and early marriages persist as survival mechanisms, rooted in unfair treatment and unequal power relations.
- **Health and social risks:** These practices are perceived to expose women and girls to HIV/STDs risks and deepen inequality.
- **Underlying drivers:** Multiple structural factors continue to sustain FFS exchanges and early marriages.

Objectives

To identify, describe and analyze the structural drivers of fish for sex and teenage marriage and its perceived linkages to HIV/STD infection risk.



To provide actionable recommendations for addressing persistent F4S exchanges and early marriages.

Methods

A **qualitative** study which employed **participatory CPAN** research methods (April-May 2024). Done in four fishing communities of Nsumbu and Mpulungu districts along Lake Tanganyika:

- Key Informant Interviews (n=17); Provincial, district and community level stakeholders
- **Life History Interviews** (n=35); men and women involved in FFS exchanges and early marriages
- Focus Group Discussions (n=20); Knowledgeable people, adult males, adult females, young men, and young women

Key Findings

Conceptualization

Defining “Fish-for-Sex” Exchanges (Pela ukupela)

- Viewed variably as economic necessity, moral compromise, or pragmatic survival strategy
- Involves sexual activity in return for preferential access to scarce fish (not free fish)
- Initiated by either party—women fish traders or fishermen—reflecting mutual negotiation dynamics
- Key indicators: preferential market treatment, ongoing credit arrangements, secretive social interactions
- Social norms: typically excludes elders (>50) and those with family ties to crew members



Early Marriages and Teen Pregnancy

- Common occurrence across fishing communities resulting from early sex debut - coping mechanism during scarcity
- Limited access to contraceptives results into teenage pregnancies, which leads to early marriages
- Formalized through early marriage: underage daughters married into fish-for-sex alliances to secure household supply
- Institutional gaps: outreach constrained, free condoms exist but negotiation capacity is low





Key Findings

Historical context



Traditionally, fishing in Lake Tanganyika focused on subsistence, with fish-for-sex exchanges largely absent.



Introduction of commercial kapenta trade increased cash dependency and shifted gender dynamics.



Economic liberalization in the 1990s expanded market access but also exposed communities to price shocks and exploitation.

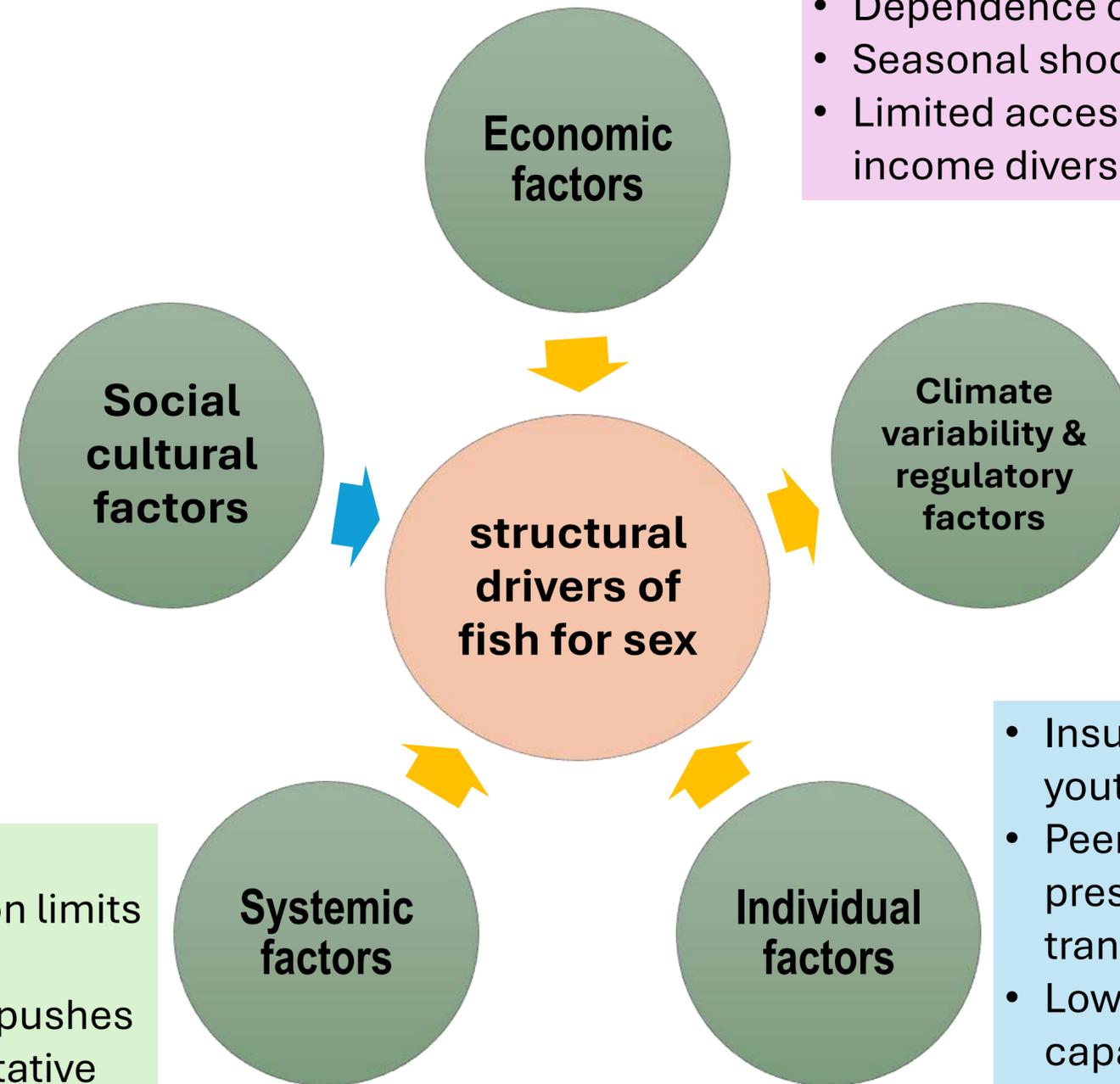


Recent climate variability has intensified vulnerabilities, fueling transactional survival strategies in a changed economic landscape.

Structural Drivers of FFS

- Traditional gender roles devalue women's bargaining power in the fish trade
- Male sexual entitlement normalizes demands for sexual favors
- Peer pressure & material aspirations drive young women toward transactional relationships
- Stigma around sexual health discourages open dialogue and protection

- Lack of livelihood diversification
- Scarce vocational training & education limits women's economic mobility
- Absence of formal financial services pushes women toward informal, often exploitative credit sources



- Extreme poverty & financial instability
- Financial exclusion
- Dependence on fishing livelihood
- Seasonal shocks (e.g. bans, Kapenta scarcity)
- Limited access to capital prevents alternative income diversification

- Flooding
- Fishing bans – to facilitate fish breeding

- Insufficient parental guidance leaves youth exposed to risky coping behaviours
- Peer influences & materialism heighten pressure to attain social status via transactional sex
- Low education & life skills reduce capacity to seek non-exploitative opportunities



Impacts

HIV & SDT Transmission

- The practice of fish-for-sex exchanges is perceived to significantly contribute to the spread of HIV and STIs
- Gendered power imbalances limit women's ability to insist on condoms
- Low awareness of safe-sex risks exacerbates transmission

Economic & Family Instability

- Pregnant women without partner support face severe financial strain
- Fathers splitting resources across households exacerbate poverty cycles
- Caring for STI-affected family members adds long-term economic burden
- Family bonds weaken under combined health, financial, and emotional stress

Teenage Pregnancies & Early Marriages

- Unintended pregnancies from fish-for-sex often precipitate early marriage
- Families formalize these unions to “legitimize” the pregnancy and secure fish supply
- Teen motherhood truncates education and reinforces intergenerational poverty
- Peer pressure and economic necessity compound adolescent vulnerability

Emotional & Psychological Stress

- Women experience isolation, depression and anxiety from stigma and health fears
- Men report guilt, regret, stress over the consequences of their actions
- Mental-health burdens erode individual well-being and livelihood capacity
- Lack of psychosocial support perpetuates trauma

Social Stigma & Disruption of Community Cohesion

- Women bear the brunt of gossip, ostracism and reputational damage
- Men face loss of respect and social ostracization, albeit to a lesser degree
- Stigma undermines mental well-being and social support networks
- Fractures trust between families and weakens overall community solidarity

Marital & Household Disharmony

- Infidelity linked to fish-for-sex triggers marital conflict, separations, divorces
- Women left to shoulder single parenthood and economic hardship
- Men juggle multiple relationships, straining limited resources
- Breakdown of family units fuels emotional trauma and social instability

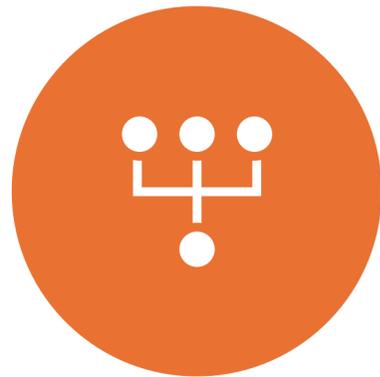
Benefits

Some women gain temporary access to fish for resale, boosting short-term income

Occasional transition to formal marriage perceived as positive by few

However, fleeting economic gains are outweighed by health risks and stigma

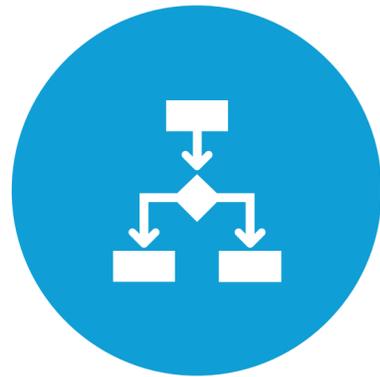
Coping and resilience strategies beyond transactional unions



Village savings groups (VSGs) provide pooled capital for fish and other petty trade and basic farm inputs.



Small-livestock (goats, chickens) enable asset accumulation and income smoothing.



Informal work exchanges—“food/cash-for-labor” help meet seasonal labor gaps.



Mutual-aid networks (e.g., borrowing maize or seed) buffer acute food shortages during shocks.

Intervention Entry Points

- Gender-transformative norm change & legal enforcement.
- Formalize community support systems.
- Livelihood & Skills: Scale up VSG-linked micro-grants for women's business and value-addition.
- Norms & Legal: Roll out community dialogues on consent, integrate by-law revisions to raise marriage age enforcement.
- Community Safety Nets: Formalize resilience hubs—link **savings groups** with local social protection schemes (e.g., cash transfers), and formal credit
- Promote Cash plus initiative

Conclusion and Recommendations

FFS and early marriages are structural responses to exclusion and shocks.

- Multi-sectoral, gender-responsive programs are needed to disrupt harmful practices.
- Engage community leaders, strengthen legal frameworks, and expand alternatives.
- Introduce Cash for Work in fishing communities during fishing bans
- Ensure inclusive growth from below through blending WVZ Empowered Worldview model and MFIs' group lending

• Thank you



Acknowledgments

- Study participants
- Local authorities
- Department of Fisheries
- Gender Department
- CPAN

