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Unmasking the Effect of Cultural Practices on Women's Rights to Access Resources: A Case of Small-scale Fishing Communities in Ghana

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Abstract

Despite Ghana's commitment to numerous human rights treaties requiring the eradication of all forms of discrimination against women, diverse practices within numerous communities persist in undermining women's rights to access resources. This article employs a human rights framework to examine the influence of traditional and cultural practices on women's rights to access resources within Ghana's coastal small-scale fisheries. The study utilised a qualitative research methodology, comprising in-depth interviews with 23 key informants and 6 focus group discussions with women from six selected small-scale fishing communities along the coastline of Ghana. The study reveals that certain detrimental cultural practices and beliefs, such as community religious taboos, widowhood rites, inheritance practices, and child marriage, continue to obstruct women's rights to access resources. The study concludes with recommendations for a holistic approach, such as policy, legislative, administrative, judicial, among others, to modify or eradicate such cultural and traditional practices that undermine the full realisation of all the rights of women and girls, and access to resources in the entire country.

Keywords

Access and control of resources, discrimination against women, Ghana, traditional and cultural practices, women's rights, small-scale fishing communities

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1. Introduction

Across the globe, each social group possesses distinctive traditional and cultural practices and beliefs intricately linked to the daily activities of its members. For example, in numerous West African nations, ethnic groups regard water bodies, such as the sea, as deities or spirits (Akyeampong, 2001; Ntiama-Baidu, 1991, 1995; Sarfo-Mensah & Oduro, 2007). Consequently, for these ethnic groups, all fishing operations are dictated by the spiritual realm (Nukunya, 1992). In Ghana, research indicates that women are essential participants in the small-scale fisheries sector (Overå, 1992; William, 2008), which is governed not only by state institutions but also by local traditional, cultural, and religious values and norms (Akyeampong, 2001; Bennet, 2002; Golo & Odumah, 2016). Consequently, the small-scale fishing activities by various ethnic groups within Ghana's coastal region are predominantly shaped by their cultural and traditional practices rooted in religious beliefs (Mensah, Koranteng, Bortey & Yeboa, 2006).

Nonetheless, the majority of these practices and beliefs either provide advantages or adversely affect particular groups, especially women (Maluleke, 2012). To eradicate such practices, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (hereafter referred to as CEDAW in this study) was enacted in 1981 and ratified by 165 nations globally. CEDAW is regarded as the most comprehensive convention concerning women's human rights (United Nations General Assembly, 1979). This treaty (CEDAW) mandates equality between women and men across all civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights, highlighting the significance of women's equal involvement in public life. Article 2 (f) of CEDAW thus mandates States parties to 'take all appropriate measures, including legislation, to modify or abolish existing laws, regulations, customs, and practices that constitute discrimination against women' (CEDAW Article 2 (f)).

Consequently, there have been concerted international attempts to modify existing cultural norms, beliefs, laws, and practices to enhance equality for women and girls since the inception of CEDAW (Schmitz & Gable, 2023). In the context of the fisheries, Articles 10.1.2 and 10.1.3 of the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries mandate all state parties to consider the rights of coastal fishing communities and their cultural or customary practices when assessing potential uses of and access to coastal resources (FAO, 1995 cited in Sharma, 2011: 46). Likewise, Article 27, paragraph 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) stipulates that "everyone has the right to freely participate in the cultural life of the community." In context of Africa, Article 19 (c) of the Optional Protocol of the African Charter on Human and People's Rights concerning the Rights of Women, to which Ghana is a signatory, compels state parties to 'promote women's access to and control over productive resources' (African Union, 2003: 17). The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, once adopted, has remained crucial in garnering support for women's rights (Global Fund for Women, 2023). Additionally, by endorsing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, member states, including Ghana, reiterated that 'gender equality is pivotal to the attainment of sustainable development for all by 2030' (United Nations, 2020: para 1).

Nonetheless, numerous scholars contend that cultural practices continue to negatively influence women's access to resources (the terms resources, assets, and properties are used interchangeably in this study) both directly and indirectly in many societies and communities (Dery, 2015; Chika, 2014; Emire & Teferi, 2013; Medard, Sobo, Ngatunga, & Chirwa, 2012; Norris & Inglehart, 2000; Yewande & Olawunmi, 2023; Torell, Owusu, & Okyere, 2016). Norris and Inglehart (2000) claim that culture has consistently exerted a substantial influence on the global representation of women throughout history. They stated in their study conducted in Tanzania that certain cultural rules and practices, serving as informal regulatory mechanisms for the utilisation of fishing resources, have been discriminatory and detrimental to women in the fishery industry. The Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) (2009) indicates that cultural bias against women hinders their access to resources essential for socio-economic development. Dery (2025) also notes that in Northern Ghana, gender-based discrimination and exclusion, exacerbated by cultural norms, are the primary obstacles preventing many rural women from accessing land.

Research within Ghana's small-scale fisheries sector indicates that fishing activities are interconnected with culture, identity, and lifestyle, while also exhibiting gender-specific roles for men and women (Boateng, Golo, Sulley & Enrinoshio; Britwum, 2024; Golo & Enrinoshio, 2023; Zhao, Tyzack, Anderson & Onoakpovike, 2012). Nevertheless, despite the scholarly literature highlighting the significance of comprehending women's access to resources (Emire & Teferi, 2013), minimal research has been conducted to explore the extent to which various cultural influences affect women's rights to access resources in small-scale fishing communities in Ghana. This article aims to fill this gap by exploring the interplay between cultural practices and women's access to resources, using small-scale fishing communities along Ghana's Western and Eastern coastlines, through the perspective of the existing human rights framework. The objective is to contribute to the current literature on women's rights and efforts to improve the

implementation and enforcement of policies related to the equitable allocation of resources in small-scale fishing communities in Ghana and beyond. The paper proceeds with a conceptual perspective that offers insights into culture and women's rights to resources. This is followed by an examination of the human rights-based framework of women's access to resources inside the SSF. The latter sections of the paper focus on the research findings and discussion, policy recommendations, and conclusion.

3. Culture, human rights, and women's rights to access resources: A Conceptual perspective

Culture is intricate as it includes knowledge and belief, along with aspects such as sculpture, regulations, ethics, customs, and various acquired skills and practices (Kant, 2001). Culture encompasses a collection of attitudes, ideas, morals, habits, values, and behaviours that are collectively held by a certain group, which may be delineated by geographical, political, or ethnic criteria (Merryman, 1985). According to Ssenyonjo (2016), culture involves inherited ideas, beliefs, values, and knowledge that form a collective foundation for social action. Irina (2011) perceives culture as an essential component of society, encompassing the legal framework. In this regard, culture serves as the foundation for individual identity creation, thereby enabling individuals to achieve their full potential (Holtmaat & Naber, 2011), and plays a crucial role in identity construction. Consequently, "each social group globally possesses distinct traditional cultural practices" (Maluleke, 2012: 2).

Culture occupies a domain within human rights (Msuya, 2019). The 2001 Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity, formulated by UNESCO's governing body in accordance with the universal principles of human rights articulated in Article 4, highlights the importance of respecting human rights and emphasises that the defence of cultural diversity is an ethical imperative, inseparable from respect for human dignity. It implies a commitment to human rights and fundamental freedoms, in particular the rights of persons belonging to minorities and those of Indigenous peoples. No one may invoke cultural diversity to infringe upon human rights guaranteed by international law, nor to limit their scope (Article of the UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity of September 2001).

International human rights accords acknowledge the significance of 'cultural rights.' Article 22 of the UDHR stipulates that every individual, as a member of society, is entitled to the realisation of the economic, social, and cultural rights essential for his dignity and the autonomous development of his personality (Article 22 of the UDHR). The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) perceives discrimination against women as an affront to human dignity (Oluwaki, Folarin & Isumonah, 2020). Consequently, it mandates all state parties to eliminate all forms of discriminatory cultural practices against women. Various international human rights instruments pertain to the safeguarding of cultural rights. Prominent among these is Article 15 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, 1966 (ICESCR), which safeguards the right of individuals to engage in cultural life. Article 27 of the ICCPR explicitly safeguards the rights of minorities to culture, safeguarding their ability to enjoy, practice, acknowledge, and express their unique cultural and religious identities.

Additionally, Article 1 of the UDHR asserts that all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights," while Article 2 stipulates that everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion" (UN General Assembly, 1948). Article 5(a) of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), approved by numerous African nations, closely parallels Article 2(2) of the African Women's Rights Protocol, stipulating that States Parties shall implement all necessary measures to alter the social and cultural norms of behaviour for men and women, aiming to eradicate prejudices and customary practices founded on the notion of the inferiority or superiority of either sex or on stereotypical roles assigned to men and women (Article 5(a) of CEDAW).

Furthermore, Article 18(2) of the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights mandates State parties to assist families who uphold morality and traditional values in gaining recognition from the community. According to Article 29(7) of the Charter, an individual is obligated to uphold and enhance positive African cultural values in interactions with fellow members of society, fostering tolerance, dialogue, and consultation, and generally contributing to the moral welfare of society (Article 29 section 7 of the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights). The Charter has multiple protections that safeguard women against discrimination. The non-discrimination section asserts that: 'Every individual shall be entitled to the enjoyment of their rights and freedoms, recognised and guaranteed in the Charter, without distinctions of any sort, including sex.' Section 18 (3) of the Charter, which is explicitly focused on women's rights, mandates all state parties to 'guarantee the eradication of any discrimination against women and to safeguard women's rights. According to researchers like Wandia (2004), the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights has, however, been ineffective in sufficiently safeguarding women's human rights. However, Wandia asserts that the

Charter solely highlights traditional African values and customs, neglecting to consider the concerns that several traditional behaviours may be detrimental or infringe upon women's rights (Wandia, 2004). Beyani (1994) is also of the view that Article 29(7) of the Charter cannot be construed to obscure the nondiscrimination provisions. Ssenyo (2007) posits that the 'positive African cultural values' articulated in the Charter are incongruent with the principles of equality and non-discrimination, hence permitting discriminatory practices against women under the guise of culture.

Concerning the fisheries, numerous human rights treaties within the framework of small-scale fisheries (SSF) endorse the execution of SSF principles and women's rights to resources. Article 2.1 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) specifies that each State Party to the present Covenant undertakes to take steps, individually and through international assistance and cooperation, especially economic and technical, to the maximum of its available resources, to achieve progressively the full realization of the rights recognized in the present Covenant by all appropriate means, including particularly the adoption of legislative measures (Article 2.1 of ICESCR).

Additionally, Article 3 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) ensures gender equality, while Article 2 forbids discrimination based on sex, among other criteria. Article 3 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) mandates State parties to guarantee equal rights for men and women in the comprehensive enjoyment of all economic, social, and cultural rights, while prohibiting discrimination based on sex (FAO, 2021; United Nations, 2020). Furthermore, the FAO Guidelines are underpinned by other international legally binding agreements, including CEDAW, which ensures women's equal rights to resources within the small-scale fishing industry. For example, Article 2 of CEDAW mandates States to implement all suitable measures, including legislation, to amend or eliminate existing laws, regulations, customs, and practices that discriminate against women. Article 5 of the same instrument requires States to modify the social and cultural behaviours of both men and women to eliminate biases, customs, and other practices. Article 14 (2) of CEDAW emphasises the significance of non-discrimination in rural regions (FAO, 2021; United Nations, 2020), whereas Articles 7 and 14 advocate for the safeguarding of rural women's rights to access social security, loans, and credit.

Other regional human rights instruments also mandate legislative actions to rectify cultural practices that infringe on women's rights. For example, the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (African Commission on Human and People's Rights [ACHPR], 2003) mandates state parties to implement all legislative and other measures to eradicate harmful practices that adversely impact the human rights of women. Article 19 of the Optional Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples Rights concerning Women's Rights in Africa mandates State parties to enhance women's access to productive resources.

4. Materials and Methods

This research employed an exploratory qualitative design. The qualitative approach effectively elucidated participants' experiences, views, attitudes, and behaviours about the influence of their cultural practices on women's access to resource rights. In contrast to quantitative research, which employs deductive reasoning to collect data and prioritises numerical representation, qualitative research enables us to utilise inductive reasoning to examine the daily processes affecting women's rights to access and control fisheries resources (Ryan, 2018). The approach enhanced the quality of data gathered for this study by providing a deeper insight into how participants perceived their experiences and the surrounding events.

The fieldwork examined various issues influencing access to resources in small-scale fishing communities of Ghana. This encompassed women's rights to access resources, alongside the recognition of international human rights standards within the sector in Ghana. The data collection commenced in June 2022 and concluded in December 2023. The research was carried out among five notable ethnic groups involved in small-scale fishing in the Western Region (Nzema and Ahanta), Central Region (Fante and Awutu-Effutu), and Volta Region (Anglo-Ewe). The primary communities involved in data collection are enumerated in Figure 1 below. In terms of the geographical location of the studied communities, as shown in Figure 1 below: 1.) Dixcove (4°48' N, 1°57' W), which is located in the Ahanta West District, and Aboadze (4°58' 0" N, 1°37' 0" W) is within the Shama District. 2.) Keta is situated between longitudes 0.30 ° E and 1.050 ° E and latitudes 5.450 ° N and 6.005 ° N. 3.) Adina, which is located in the Ketu South is positioned between latitudes 6 ° 00' N and 6 ° 10' N and longitudes 1 ° 00' E and 1 ° 00' E. 3.) Anomabo, which is made up of a total area of 612 square kilometers, is with boundaries of 21 kilometres along the coast, and 13 kilometres inland, and located 12 km east of Cape Coast in the central region of southern Ghana. 4.) Winneba, which is situated within Effutu Municipality, is between latitudes 5020 North and longitudes 0025 West and 0037, on the Eastern part of the Central

Region, Ghana (Fig. 1). These communities are not only the most prominent small-scale fishers in their respective regions but also Ghana as a whole (Mensah et al., 2006).



Figure 1: Map indicating study communities

Source: Authors' construct.

The primary data collection methods were semi-structured in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. A total of 23 comprehensive interviews and 6 women-only focus group discussions, each with a maximum of six participants, were conducted, yielding 59 participants from the six small-scale fishing communities. The key informants chosen from each study location comprised Chiefs, Queen Mothers, Chief Fishermen, Traditional Religious Leaders, Women Leaders, and Assembly Members. The selection and interrogation of these pivotal individuals for the study are predicated on their prominent roles: i.) as stewards of traditional and cultural norms and practices concerning fisheries resource allocation and management, ii.) adjudicators of fishing-related disputes within small-scale fishing communities in Ghana (Golo, 2012; Akpalu, 2002). Furthermore, one officer from the Ghana Fisheries Commission was purposively selected and interviewed from each of the three regions (Volta, Central, and Western) of the study communities. To ensure equitable representation, multistage sampling techniques, namely stratified, convenience, and purposive sampling techniques, were utilised in the selection of study communities, key informants, and female participants for the focus group discussions (FGD).

Ghana is a multilingual country with different languages used among speakers based on social context. Consequently, the interviews and the FDGs were conducted in five distinct languages: Ewe (Volta Region), Fante, Effutu (Central Region), Ahanta, and Nzema (Western Region) by two trained native speakers, each from the studied communities. The participants were guaranteed anonymity throughout the in-depth interviews and focus group discussion segments. The interviews and focus group discussions averaged 45 to 60 minutes in duration and were audio-recorded with participant consent. The gathered data in Ewe, Fante, Effutu, Ahanta, and Nzema were transcribed and translated into English by the same native speakers involved in the data collection. The transcribed data were subsequently refined and thematically analysed utilising the ATLAS.TI software. The data analysis employed analytical techniques, such as constant comparative analysis. This analytical method was employed to discern the similarities and differences among participants from diverse ethnic groups regarding the phenomenon under investigation. A narrative analysis was employed to examine the participants' distinctive life experiences concerning cultural practices and their access to resources. The field data illustrate the intersection of women's rights to resources and cultural practices in small-scale fishing communities of Ghana, specifically examining the influence of these practices on women's access to resources. These cultural practices encompass customary beliefs, inheritance customs, widowhood rights, and early or forced child marriage.

5. Findings and Discussion

This section delineates the influence of traditional and cultural norms and practices on women's rights, as well as their access to resources. The findings represent prevalent themes extracted from the responses, elucidations, and experiences of participants in the study sites.

5.1 Menstrual taboos and access to resources

In Ghana, the income of women in fishing communities depends very much on fishery resources. Moreover, these communities are inextricably linked to broader socio-cultural beliefs, traditions, and taboos as a source of identity and social well-being (Bennett, 2002). In this context, there are laws and regulations of the fishery that are based on traditional religious beliefs, customs, and taboos of fishing communities along the coast. The participants in this study confirmed that most of these cultural practices and norms negatively influence women's access to financial and natural resources within the study settings. They revealed that although women dominate small-scale fisheries economies, community cultural practices influenced by religious taboos often restrict their access to various resources. The participants revealed that certain religious doctrines and taboos prohibited women from engaging with the sea during menstruation. The prevailing belief is that women in this condition are spiritually impure, rendering them offensive to approach the sea and its spirits. As articulated by a traditional priest of Adina in the Volta Region, 'women's menstrual blood could defile the sea, thereby inciting the ire of the sea deities' (Interview with Traditional Priest, Adina, June 12, 2023). Almost all the female participants further emphasised that neglecting this custom incurs repercussions from the gods.

This perspective was corroborated by nearly all the traditional priests interviewed in this study, asserting that every woman in the community was required to adhere to the tradition to ensure both individual and communal harmony with the sea, which would result in a bountiful harvest. A traditional religious leader in Axim, one of the study locations in the Central region, asserted that: 'any woman who visits the beach during her menstruation is penalised with alcoholic beverages, a white ram, and other offerings to appease the deities and avert calamity for the community' (Interview with the traditional religious leader in Axim, August 2, 2023).

The female participants, however, indicated that adherence to this specific norm within their respective communities persistently hindered their access to fishery resources. During the subsequent discussion, FGD participants articulated that, despite the restriction of resources imposed by this cultural practice, they felt compelled to adhere to it rigorously to avert misfortunes affecting themselves, their families, husbands, and the broader community. As elaborated by a senior fish processor:

It is imperative to guarantee that our community remains devoid of calamity; we consistently adhere to our traditional laws and cultural practices associated with our deities, rather than pursuing resources that may provoke their wrath and subject the entire community to unforeseen disaster and hardship (FGD, Keta, June 12, 2023).

The aforementioned quotation indicates that although the women are dissatisfied with this specific cultural and religious practice (due to its effect on their resource accessibility), the apprehension that their disobedience could lead to misfortune for themselves and the entire community compels them to adhere to it. Indeed, most of the women participants across all the study sites claimed that various cultural practices concerning fishing and management of the fishery resources did not favour their interests.

Focus group discussion participants in this study further stated that due to traditional and cultural practices in their communities, they could not participate in decision-making processes concerning fishing and fishing methods that could sustain and increase fish stock. In the following excerpt, for example, a community Queen mother summarised the situation:

For us to stay home without going to the beach for five days just because we are in our menses not only deprives us of access to fish but also income to take care of our children. It is sad to say that most of the traditional practices and cultural norms completely discriminate against us [women] and alienate us from the decision-making process concerning fishing methods that can increase or sustain catches [...] although we [women] are the main stakeholders in the fishing value chain, our cultural practices do not permit us to have a say on issues responsible for our less access to fishery resources (Interview with Queen Mother in Winneba, September 17, 2023).

A state fisheries regulatory officer corroborated that:

Our cultural practices are indeed essential for our uniqueness, but some need to be discarded. We all know that our women play a vital role in the small-scale fishing sector, especially when it comes to processing and marketing [...] they need to, at least, be part of decision-making processes concerning the methods that are being used in fishing these days. Because they are bearing the brunt of the current illegal, unapproved, and unregulated methods that some of the fisher folks are using. Preventing them from having a say on problems in the name of tradition and culture is quite unfair (Interview with Regional Fisheries Commission Officer in Winneba, 28 October 2023).

The above quotations corroborate scholars like [Golo and Erinosho, and Owusu and Essien's \(2023\)](#) and [Torell, Owusu and Nyako \(2016\)](#) observations that women experience the brunt of inequality in fishery tasks and decision-making despite their crucial contributions.

5.2 Widowhood practices and the ability to inherit the deceased husband's inheritance

The practice of widowhood is an old-age tradition transmitted from generation to generation (Adeyemo, 2016). In many African traditional societies, including Ghana, women are compelled to undergo widowhood rites to mourn and show respect to their deceased husbands (George et al, 2016). The rite involves the confinement of a woman after the death of her husband for several days, including not leaving the house for a period of three or four months. The belief underlying this practice is that the spirit of the late husband is still on a journey to the ancestral world and would therefore wish the wife to pay maximum respect to him by not engaging in acts that may be considered offensive to him and the community (Adeyemo, 2016; Ewelukwa, 2002; [Nukunya, 2016](#)). Virtually all the research participants believed that the concept of widowhood prohibits widows from joining in mainstream labour and hence engaged in fish processing and selling to boost their income. It is therefore a period that could deprive women of the opportunity to access enough resources. A lady who has undergone the practice of widowhood from Winneba in the Central Region explained:

The widowhood rite does not suit us [women] at all. The rite always inhibits us from having access to useful resources because of limits on our mobility. It hinders our ability to work for several days and potentially months. I remember how my fish processing enterprises thrived. I successfully obtained multiple fish processing apparatuses. Due to the extended duration I dedicated to performing this widowhood rite following my husband's demise, I am currently able to procure only a limited quantity of fish for processing. I currently owe several individuals as a consequence (FGD, Adina, September 2, 2023).

During the focus group discussion, widows disclosed that the duration spent doing the widowhood ceremony significantly affected their access to resources for an extended period. A widow from Keta in the Volta Region expressed the following:

The limited access to financial resources and other assets resulting from the widowhood rite consistently impacts our livelihood activities, including fish processing and trading in this region. A customer visited me as I was undergoing the rite. She was astonished by the deteriorated condition of my fish processing equipment. I once possessed approximately five distinct types of ovens, but I am currently left with only one. I have lost all my clients to competitors, and currently, I lack the funds to repair the ovens. Because I am a widow, I was prohibited from utilising my deceased husband's fishing boat to generate little income (FGD, Keta, June 15, 2023).

Several national and international laws have been deployed to promote gender equality in Ghana on inheritance issues. For example, has since the mid-1980s implemented the Interstate Succession Law (Provisional National Defence Council Law [P.N.D.C. L] III) 1985 as amended 1991 as P.N.D.C.L. 264. This law prohibits cultural practices that hamper the rights of women to inherit the resources of their deceased husbands. It developed from the national effort to conform cultural and traditional practices of the ethnic groups with the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) Ghana ratified in 1981. Nonetheless, many of the participants, including the Queen Mother of the Axim fishing community stated that widows and female children seldom obtain direct access to the properties or resources of their deceased husbands or fathers: 'Whenever a man dies, it is typically the male offspring or the families of the deceased who assume control of the properties' (Interview, November 24, 2023). An FDG participant from Dixcove articulated that neither the widow nor the female offspring possessed any entitlement

to inherit from their deceased husband and father, respectively. Consequently, the study participants predominantly conveyed discontent with the practice due to the socio-economic deprivation caused by the confinement. A participant in the FGD from Axim emphasised that the matrilineal inheritance pattern not only favours male offspring but also undermines female offspring.

I believed I would inherit my mother's properties upon her death; however, I was astonished to learn from family elders that my brother was designated to receive the majority of her assets, including the house and the stores (FGD, Axim, October 4, 2023).

Participants from the Volta Region, where a patrilineal inheritance system is observed, said that male offspring were consistently allowed to inherit the properties of their deceased parents; however, female offspring are not. Two traditional chiefs we interviewed explained that the preference for male offspring to inherit their deceased fathers' properties was grounded in the belief that males were more adept at preserving familial assets than females, who might transfer inherited properties to another family through marriage. During the focus group discussion, a participant from Keta recounted her experience:

In my situation, upon our father's demise, his two residences, two fishing vessels, and equipment were apportioned amongst my two brothers by the family elders. Upon my complaint, the elders admonished me that they would not permit the transfer of their brother's assets to my husband's family. I was informed that they desire all of my father's properties to remain within his family. I received a limited sum of money bequeathed by my father (FGD, Keta, July 16, 2023).

When enquired about any state legislation that enables widows and children to inherit the estates of their deceased husbands and fathers, none of the participants in the FDG could identify one. A participant from Dixcove stated, "We are unaware of the legal right to inherit our husbands' property upon their death" (FGD, Dixcove, October 6, 2023).

5.3. Child marriage

Child marriages impede the full realisation of the rights of the girl child. Such girls are often taken out of school and given to adult males as wives. The United Nations Children's Fund (2020) indicates that over 90 per cent of early-married girls dropped out of school, compared to 18 per cent of their unmarried counterparts. Compelling girls to drop out of school not only constitutes human rights violations, but also the practice limits the livelihood chances of affected girls. These practices pose threats to the various human rights instruments that Ghana has ratified, including articles 1, 2 and 24 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC); article 16 of the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW); article 21 of the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child 1990. These treaties uniformly prohibit child marriage, in addition to Article 6 of the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, especially the Rights of Women in Africa 2003 protocol, which in Article 6 directed member countries to address the issue of child marriage with alacrity. Ghana rolled out various legislations and policies, including Free and Compulsory Universal Basic Education (FCUBE), to ensure that every child attends school and is safely kept there until graduation.

Many participants in the focus group discussion in this study expressed their low or nonexistent educational attainment, which hindered or precluded their ability to participate in lucrative economic activities to independently acquire resources. For instance, one individual indicated that. Due to desperation and financial hardship, certain parents compel their daughters to forgo their education and willingly get into marriage as a form of compensation to affluent men or for material benefit (FDG, Adina, November 2, 2023). A Queen Mother from Adina further reported:

The practice of compelling children to enter into early marriages with elderly, affluent fishermen and owners of boats or fishing gear as a means of settling debts or providing recompense by their parents is prevalent in numerous rural regions of Ghana. However, it is more pronounced in rural, small-scale fishing villages such as ours. The tradition has been passed down from our great-grandparents. This issue is entrenched in our customary norms, which render certain women particularly vulnerable to poverty, as many victims often abandon their education and begin childbearing at a young age. They possess neither professional nor educational qualifications, nor do they engage in meaningful livelihood activities. The vast majority of individuals in this region rely exclusively on their spouses (Interview with Queen Mother, Adina, November 2, 2023).

A lady who declined early marriage believed she was more advantaged in terms of resource availability than many of her peers who were compelled to marry at a young age. She recounted:

Four of my childhood pals were compelled by their parents to wed affluent individuals. One individual discontinued their education and began having children. Currently, many colleagues who were compelled to marry at a young age possess no personal property to serve as collateral for a company loan, rendering them entirely reliant on their husbands for support. Initially, my father attempted to compel me into an early marriage with a man whose boat he was employed on, but I declined. I am currently a seamstress; I acquired sewing skills after finishing Junior High School. I currently possess a lot of resources, including a fishing boat and fishing nets, which I acquired two years ago. I am presently accumulating funds to purchase a parcel of land to commence the construction of my residence (FGD, Winneba, August 16, 2023).

Some participants indicated that forced and early child marriage might provide immediate financial relief to the girl's parents; however, others contended that such practices cumulatively infringed upon the victim's right to access resources, even within the household. Child marriages engender not just undue reliance on the spouse but also prolong the subjugation of women compelled to marry at a young age. An illustrative example is the perspective of an Assemblyman, a locally elected political official in Keta:

Early and coerced child marriage practices can result in enduring adverse consequences for the victims.' It obstructs the professional advancement of the victims in improving their abilities or competencies (Interview with Assemblyman, Keta, August 23, 2023).

The findings in this study resonate with existing literature. The Demographic and Health Survey of the Ghana Statistical Service (2014) indicated that about 21% of women aged 20-24 are married before the age of 18, indicating a high prevalence of child marriage. This trend increased over the years, as the Ghana Statistical Service (2021) reported that 19% of girls are married before they attain the legal marriage age of 18.

6. Policy Needs and Recommendations

Okin contends that women's rights, as delineated by international agreements, constitute universal norms that all nations are obligated to uphold (Okin, 1998). Thus, traditional and cultural practices need not impede the achievement of women's rights; instead, they should facilitate women's participation in cultural and traditional life (Msuya, 2019). Thus, cultural practices need not impede the achievement of women's rights; instead, they should facilitate women's participation in cultural life (Msuya, 2019). However, it is evident from the findings of this study that despite the various international and national laws to eradicate gender inequality and discrimination against women, cultural practices within small-scale fishing communities of Ghana continue to deprive women of the right to access resources. Less access to resources is thus endemic among women in small-scale fishing communities in Ghana due to cultural practices. The findings deepen our understanding of the literature on the dynamics of women's rights, culture, access to resources and highlight vulnerability, marginalisation and discrimination against women in the various segments of our society. The findings in the current study resonate with Msuya's (2019) earlier appeal for culture to offer significant avenues for women to realise their rights in various ways. This appeal particularly shows that culture is not static, as argued elsewhere (Nukunya, 2016; Dando, Taylor, & Sandhan, 2023; Winkel, 2019). Any attempt to eradicate the cultural practices that undermine the rights of women's access to resources and improve their livelihood security by any means must, therefore, be in line with Article 2 of CEDAW. In this context, the government of Ghana and other stakeholders need to take all relevant actions, including legislation, to alter or abolish existing cultural practices that institute discrimination against women, especially in terms of access to resources within small-scale fishing communities and in the entire country. Such attempts should include extending awareness among traditional and religious leaders and chiefs, who are the guardians of these practices, to alter their perspectives towards cultural practices that discriminate against women in numerous communities nationwide. This would significantly safeguard and improve women's rights to access resources, particularly within small-scale fishing communities in the country. Additionally, given that most cultural practices are reinforced by customary laws that fail to serve the interest of females, the Government of Ghana and other stakeholders, as a matter of policy, should strictly harmonise these laws and make them serve the interests and needs of women and girls who lost their husbands and fathers to enable them to inherit their late spouses and parents' assets. Furthermore, women within the fisheries should be encouraged to participate in policy formulation and decision-making concerning how and where to fish within the SSF sector. This could bring about reforms that boost their access to fisheries resources within the sector. Finally, the women in the study sites are not only denied their rights to inherit their husbands' properties, but they are also not aware of the laws that ensure their access to such properties. This finding calls for a need to enhance women's awareness of legislation on such problems. The Ministry of Gender and Social Protection (MoGCSP), Commission for Human Rights and

Administrative Justice (CHRAJ), and National Commission on Civic Education (NCCE) should be assigned the responsibility of raising awareness of the international human rights instruments and national laws that border on women's rights in terms of equal access to their deceased husbands' properties (resources). As pointed out by scholars, education and gender sensitisation of men and women are crucial tools of change and successful strategies of transforming popular beliefs, attitudes, and conduct (Bamgbose, 2002; Odebode, 2004). Early and forced marriage practices, which have been highlighted as another widespread cultural practice that directly or indirectly deprives individuals of their rights to access resources in the current study locations, could be reformed through awareness and sensitisation initiatives. The awareness effort should try to highlight the dangers associated with such a marriage, especially its deprivation of capabilities and rights of female victims. This should be done in many local languages to enable both men and women to comprehend, acknowledge, and value the girl child's potential. The awareness programme should be extended to educational settings by adopting textbooks and curricula that reflect the notion that women are human beings with rights. It must be noted that the study did not cover every aspect of the effect of cultural practices on women's rights. Further study with a large sample size could be considered to cover the general interaction between women's rights and cultural practices in the entire country. This would result in a more comprehensive understanding of the situation for sustainable intervention.

In conclusion, this paper set out to identify traditional and cultural practices and beliefs that affect women's right to access resources in the SSF communities of Ghana. We demonstrate that despite the growing global and national efforts to eradicate gender inequality and discrimination, various traditional and cultural belief practices reinforced by men's superior position continue to deny women their right to access and control resources in coastal small-scale fishing communities of Ghana. In this study, the recognisable traditional and cultural practices and beliefs that discriminate against women, and thus deny them access to resources in the study locations, are, namely, religious beliefs, conventional and cultural inheritance practices, widowhood rites, and forced and early child marriage. These practices are reinforced by men's superior position to a large extent and are mostly unfavourable to women, and therefore do not serve their interests. It is noteworthy to note that in all cases of human rights, the state is recognised as the primary duty bearer. Accordingly, the Government of Ghana and other stakeholders need to take appropriate legislative, administrative, judicial, and other measures towards the full realisation of women's rights in the country. Against this backdrop, there is a need for holistic intervention by strengthening domestic laws and policies that address gender prejudices emanating from cultural, traditional belief practices that do not serve the interests of women in the SSF communities and other sectors in Ghana.

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Appendices

Appendix A. In-depth Interview Guide for Key Informants (Traditional Religious Leaders, Assemblymen, Chiefs, Queen Mothers and Chief Fishermen)

As a traditional custodian of fisheries/community leader, I am aware that you possess extensive knowledge and experience regarding prevailing cultural/traditional practices, norms, taboos and belief systems that guide the fisheries sector and general daily lifestyle activities in the community. I would humbly request that you share with me how these practices and belief systems influence women's access to resources in the community.

1. My first question is, how do these traditional/cultural practices, taboos, and belief systems regulate or shape the daily activities and lifestyle of these community members in general?
2. How do these traditional/cultural practices, taboos, and belief systems regulate the small-scale fishery activities in the community?
3. How practicable are these traditional and cultural practices, and how do they enhance the management of small-scale fishing activities in the community?
4. How do the regulatory frameworks of these practices, taboos, and other belief systems influence women's activities and lifestyle within the fishery sector?
5. Do these practices and belief systems influence women's access to various resources for their survival? If yes, could you please explain?
6. Will you say these traditional/cultural practices, taboos, and other belief systems of the community marginalise or discriminate against women? If yes, in what ways? If no, explain why you think so.

Appendix B. Focus group discussion guide for women

1. What is the general engagement of fishery roles in this community?
2. What are the prevailing traditional/cultural norms, practices, taboos, and religious belief systems in this community?
3. In your opinion, will you say these practices and belief systems shape the roles of women and men differently in this community? If yes, how?
4. How do traditional/cultural practices, taboos, and religious belief systems influence females' daily lifestyle and daily activities in the community?
5. Could you please mention some of these females' lifestyles and daily activities, and the extent to which they are influenced by the prevailing traditional/cultural practices, taboos, and belief systems in the community?
6. How do these traditional/cultural practices, taboos, and belief systems regulate the small-scale fishery activities in the community?
 - How do they influence women's access to fishery resources?
7. In your opinion, why do women continue to adhere to these traditional practices and belief systems in the community?
8. Will you say these traditional/cultural practices, taboos, and other belief systems of the community marginalise or discriminate against women? If yes, in what ways? If no, explain why you think so.
9. Is there anything else you would like to share with me concerning the influence of cultural/traditional practices on females' access to resources in this community?

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