

PATHFINDER

No Sex for Fish

Integrated Gender Equity, Health, and Climate Resilience Solutions in the Kenya Darwin Initiative



Pamela and Florence are leaders from the Roo Village Beach Management Unit.

SUMMARY

In each of the countries where Pathfinder works, women's health has become more intricately linked with climate change. Climate resilience efforts have become crucial for improving and sustaining health and development. In Kenya's Lake Victoria region, where fishing is a vital economic activity, rural fishing communities confront these connected challenges, which have a deep impact on women.

Climate change has adversely affected the lake ecosystem, leading to reduced fish catches that threaten the livelihoods and health of women. These women face health challenges, including HIV, due to social norms and economic disparities. With fewer fish available, many women fish mongers turn to transactional sex to secure fish to sell. This exploitative "sex for fish" practice reduces their agency over their sexual and reproductive health (SRH) exposes them to sexually transmitted infections (STI) and unintended pregnancy.

To address these issues, the Darwin Initiative, with funding from the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO), implemented the [Pairing Community Conservation Areas with Sustainable Aquaculture in Lake Victoria](#) project from 2021–2024. Pathfinder's role aimed to promote gender equity and mitigate health risks as part of the project goals of sustainable aquaculture, enhanced environmental conservation, and resilience to climate change.

Led by Conservation International in partnership with the Homa Bay county government, Pathfinder added a holistic view of sustainable development, including SRH. Project achievements included improved conservation of the lake ecosystem, enhanced access to health services, and reduced reliance on transactional sex. This brief provides an overview of the key strategies and activities that contributed to these results, and offers insights for stakeholders in integrated health, women's empowerment, and climate resilience programming.

BACKGROUND

Challenges in the Lake Victoria Region

The intersection of environmental degradation with ongoing poverty and harmful socio-cultural norms undermines women's health, autonomy, and agency. In the Lake Victoria ecosystem, degradation due to climate change has resulted in a decline in fish catches, and the encroachment of fishing activities into riparian areas on the edges of the lake has led to habitat loss and biodiversity decline. These environmental challenges impact the communities that rely on fishing for their livelihoods, many of whom are already experiencing poverty. Longstanding disparities and socio-cultural practices limit women's opportunities and reinforce gender inequalities. As fish catches dwindle, many women fishmongers resort to transactional sex to secure fish, exposing them to SRH risks including STIs.

The Darwin Initiative project at Lake Victoria collaborated with local government and community structures in two implementation

sites in Homabay County—Roo and Ukula beaches. Each has a Beach Management Unit (BMU) set up to sustainably manage fisheries' activities and increase the participation of community stakeholders in fishery management.

Pathfinder conducted a comprehensive gender analysis of the Lake Victoria fisheries sector, to identify norms around, challenges to, and opportunities for, women's involvement in fish harvesting, processing, marketing, trading, and leadership. With these insights, Pathfinder designed women's empowerment strategies that incorporated inclusivity and equitable participation. Addressing the interconnected issues with an SRH and rights (SRHR) approach that responded to community needs proved essential for promoting sustainable development, improving health outcomes, and fostering gender equality.

Challenges women face in the fisheries sector¹



Social norms and gender stereotypes

Women often face discrimination and limited opportunities due to prevailing attitudes and expectations.



Education and skills gaps

Unequal opportunities pose barriers to women's full participation in the sector.



Inequality in decision making processes

Women are often excluded from important discussions and decisions that impact the fisheries sector.



Access to resources and capital

Lack of support limits women's ability to start and sustain businesses.



"Jaboya" or sex for fish

Lack of support limits women's ability to start and sustain businesses.

The Darwin Initiative

Pairing Community Conservation Areas with Sustainable Aquaculture in Lake Victoria (2021–2024)

The response to these interconnected challenges required an integrated approach to address gender gaps, promote environmental conservation, save threatened native species, alleviate poverty by increasing income, and meet the health needs of communities.

Led by Conservation International in partnership with the Homa Bay county government, Pathfinder International, Flora and Fauna International, and Victory Farms, the Darwin Initiative Lake Victoria project took a comprehensive approach. The project aimed to develop a model for aquaculture and inland fisheries that provides sustainable benefits through community-based conservation and holistic development initiatives. Pathfinder's role was to build women's resilience and strengthen women's agency by fostering economic empowerment and amplifying their voices, including through greater participation and leadership in BMUs.

An integrated solution for Lake Victoria

Based on the gender analysis, Pathfinder designed five strategies to promote women's health, empowerment, and equitable participation in community conservation efforts. The Darwin Initiative, FCDO, and the prime organization, Conservation International, all recognized Pathfinder's implementation of the gender component as the most impactful in the consortium due to the accomplishments in women's economic independence, and leadership.



Florence Ken, Chairlady of Kaksingri ward traders association.

1. Improving access to and acceptance of SRH services

Pathfinder conducted health outreach events for fishing communities to promote informed health decisions and improve access to and use of essential health services, including SRH and HIV prevention. These health campaigns involved mobile clinics and partnerships with BMUs to serve as referral agents to expand access to voluntary family planning, information about reducing SRH risks, antenatal care (ANC), and skilled birth attendance.

By supporting women to make informed decisions, and emphasizing the importance of skilled deliveries and comprehensive ANC, the project enhanced community health. This approach addressed immediate health concerns while fostering long-term wellbeing and resilience.

One outcome from the health outreach was improvements in child immunization. Pathfinder reached over 800 women and 948 children with immunization services—significantly lowering the number of cases of missed immunizations on the two beaches. At the start of the outreach efforts, defaulter cases stood at 237, and at project end this stood at 39, reflecting an 83.5% reduction. According to the community health promoters, this is the lowest number of defaulting cases ever recorded in the area.

2. Mobilizing community social support for women's empowerment

Pathfinder facilitated community awareness campaigns about the importance of protecting the lake ecosystem and adopting healthy behaviors. With Homa Bay County government officials and local leaders, the project engaged the community via workshops, seminars, public meetings, and educational materials. These efforts emphasized sustainable fishing practices, the preservation of native species, and the benefits of an unspoiled lake environment. These initiatives increased community engagement, fostered ownership, and laid the foundation for sustainable development and improved livelihoods in the region.

Provision of Boats to Discourage Exploitative Practices

To address exploitative practices such as "sex for fish," the project donated two boats to women's groups, fostering a safer and more equitable working environment. As boat owners, women employ men to harvest fish while the women manage and distribute the catch upon docking, often prioritizing women buyers.

The two boats greatly enhanced women fishmongers' access to fish. This initiative supported their livelihoods, promoting greater economic independence and security for women in the Lake Victoria region.

3. Fostering women's economic independence

The project trained women entrepreneurs to overcome business challenges and improve their performance. The project also provided grants to five women's groups, distributing them equally among members as loans within a revolving fund. This facilitated the growth of individual businesses and increased household incomes.

The women's groups promoted collaboration and collective action. To foster a savings culture, the project encouraged the women's groups to form savings and loan associations. Promoting financial stability and savings enabled a reliable safety net for women's economic independence and greater family resilience.

In a strategic effort to reduce pressure on lake resources and enhance community resilience, the project also introduced alternative livelihoods for local communities, including poultry farming, planting of indigenous tree species, and small-scale vegetable gardening.

These initiatives aimed to demonstrate sustainable income sources, especially during periods of low fish catch. By diversifying incomes, these initiatives helped reduce reliance on fishing, allowing fish populations to recover and the lake ecosystem to thrive. Training programs and resources supported community members in adopting and maintaining these new ventures. By project close, the local economy saw positive impact from these alternative livelihoods, which have provided stable income opportunities and improved food security and nutrition.

“With the grant, I started a small poultry farm, which has been thriving. The financial independence I've gained is empowering, and I can now save money for my children's education.

— Florence
member, Superstar Women Group

4. Promoting women's leadership

The project held training sessions with 65 BMU leaders and members, focused on governance with a gender perspective, that supported women's empowerment. With this advocacy, the project enhanced social systems that support women's economic empowerment and integrated gender considerations into the operations and decision-making processes of BMUs. As a direct result of this training, each BMU established a gender department and appointed a community member as the gender focal person to lead gender mainstreaming discussions and represent women's voices within the BMU leadership.

At the community level, Pathfinder implemented two interventions aimed at increasing gender equity. A mentorship initiative strengthened women's agency to address power imbalances, while community dialogues promoted positive masculinity. The number of women in leadership roles within the BMUs doubled from 5 to 10, ensuring that women's perspectives and needs are represented and addressed in the management of fishery resources. The project's efforts have not only enhanced women's leadership capacities but also fostered a more inclusive and equitable governance structure in the Lake Victoria region.

5. Scaling community-led aquatic conservation for sustainable fisheries

The Darwin Initiative spearheaded the establishment of Community Conservation Areas, demarcating and protecting over 1,000 hectares of fish breeding areas to enhance fish reproduction and survival. The project emphasized sustainable fishing practices, such as using selective fishing gear that allows smaller fish to escape, ensuring the survival of juvenile fish. To further support this effort, the project reduced manipulation of riparian areas, decreasing erosion, sedimentation, and pollution in these critical habitats.

The project also reintroduced fish species facing extinction, particularly the *Oreochromis esculentus* tilapia, which were added to breeding sites to help restore biodiversity. These comprehensive initiatives aimed to increase fish populations and nurture the lake ecosystem, promoting long-term sustainability and resilience for the Lake Victoria fisheries.

Pheisha Auma, Susan Omedo, and Lydia Akinyi showcase the boat and fishing gear awarded to them by the Darwin Initiative



CONCLUSION

The Pairing Community Conservation Areas with Sustainable Aquaculture in Lake Victoria project strengthened women's economic empowerment, facilitated their greater inclusion in BMUs, and reduced risky sexual behavior. The combined strategies of scaling community-led aquatic conservation with mobilizing social support for women's economic empowerment and improved health contributed to the positive outcomes.

Based on the initial gender analysis, Pathfinder worked with local leaders, women's groups, and BMUs to address deeply ingrained patriarchal norms which manifest in resistance to gender equity. Despite this challenge, Pathfinder proved that although cultural change takes time, it is possible when entire communities—not just women—are engaged in gender transformation.

Integrating health with economic and environmental issues fostered the engagement of men in comprehensive efforts to increase participation in conservation and improve health.

After awareness sessions and trainings, communities prioritized both livelihoods and health services, especially when access to health services was made easier by mobile outreach. The multisectoral achievements offer insights for stakeholders in integrated health, women's empowerment, and climate resilience programming.

Key Results

Improved health-seeking and wellbeing

- Integrated health services provided to over 800 women
- Reduced reliance on transactional "sex for fish"

Increased economic independence for women

- 203% growth in number of women engaging in businesses
- 100% access to business financing from women's group revolving funds and savings and loan associations

Advanced women's agency and leadership

- Doubled women's representation in BMU leadership from 5 to 10
- Women showed agency by pursuing leadership roles beyond BMUs

Pamela Salim with a fishing net awarded by the Darwin Initiative.

Pathfinder expands access to sexual and reproductive health services, opening the door to opportunities for women and all individuals to thrive—economically, educationally, and civically. Driven by our country-led leadership and local community partners, Pathfinder brings together a suite of services and programs that enable millions of people to choose their own paths forward.