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## Strategies of Women Fish Traders in Ibaka, Niger Delta, Nigeria, in Coping with Cultural and Institutional Constraints

EKAETE UDONG, AAD VAN TILBURG, ANKE NIEHOF

*Wageningen University and Research Centre, Social Sciences, The Netherlands*

### Abstract

Women's livelihood strategies in the Niger Delta, Nigeria, have been largely ignored by researchers, who are often more pre-occupied with environmental impact assessments required for establishing new oil fields. This research focuses on the strategies and activities of women fish traders in the Niger Delta for whom fish trade is their principle source of livelihood, within the context of prevailing cultural, institutional and environmental constraints. Hence, the key question addressed in this paper is: What strategies do women fish marketers adopt in carrying out their business in the face of cultural and institutional constraints? Research was carried out during 2007–2008 in Ibaka, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. Survey data were collected from a total of 100 purposively selected households and ethnographic methods — life history interviews, focus group discussions, observation and in-depth interviews with key informants — were used to collect qualitative data. The fish traders were categorised based on the type of fish they trade in: Bonga traders, Big Fish traders and Crayfish traders. Data included the characteristics of households, the fish market, fish marketing practices and other livelihood strategies of the women. The coping strategies of the women traders include trading in fish, switching from trading in one species to another depending on the season, subsistence farming, and other economic activities such as renting out rooms. The cultural constraints include polygamy, discriminatory inheritance laws, and traditional fish-smoking practices. Institutional constraints include lack of infrastructural and other facilities that would facilitate their economic and domestic activities. The study tests the relationship between women's coping strategies and their personal and business characteristics (number of years in the trade, amount of capital, assets owned). The paper ends with a discussion on the kind of personal or business factors that contribute to success of coping strategies in the context of the cultural and institutional constraints.

**Keywords:** Coping strategies, cultural and institutional constraints, Ibaka, livelihood security, women fish traders, Nigeria