

# Women's participation in the blue economy and growth

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## Abstract

Women are important contributors in every sphere of life inclusive of economy and also contributes in maintaining ecology. Blue economy is having very wide scope right from fisheries to tourism and also contributing to deep – sea research. Although the scope is vast but also the same is full of structural and systematic challenges. The concern becomes even more significant when one fact will be considered as India is having Nine coastal state. Considering such a significant number of coastal states the participation of women becomes even more significant and also necessary. Example of such challenges are discrimination in pay, safety at workplace and not adequate representation. The empowerment will enhance the potential which ultimately contributes to sustainable growth. In order to ensure the growth and participation financial support and capacity building programs are required especially in coastal region wherein the change will be more significant. As the development can only be transpired only if it is also going to contribute to social well being as well.

**Key words:** Gender equity, social well-being, Institutional support

## Introduction

The resources belong to all of us inclusive of sea and resources related to the same and at the same time it becomes important that without having cooperation at optimal level no benefits can be harness. The same implies to recognizing the contribution of women in the sustainable development in the blue economy. The term blue economy denotes towards harnessing all the benefits from ocean while fostering the health of marine ecosystem. No matter how ambitious the goal maybe but it will still not be achieved if the same will not be recognizing contribution made by women in the various area related to blue economy, such as, fisheries, coastal tourism and transports. To ensure the inclusivity in growth, resilience and inclusivity gender equity is need of the hour.

Owing vastness of sea and the same vastness also attributes to share in employment directly or indirectly and there also share of women is also significant in many coastal economies. Despite of sharing near to half of contribution to the economy still the presence has been undervalued and role in decision making is marginalised. In order to ensure sustainable growth and harness benefits fully it is important that inclusivity in all the sphere is required to be solicited. Be it matter of disparity in wage standards, systematic exclusion in from matters related to decision making, finance and training role played by women have always been marginalised.

The intersection of Blue economy and Gender Equality

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The concept of blue economy suggests unique opportunity as it can simply be understandable that the contribution of Women Empowerment is most of the time community driven. Reason being very simple many coastal economic activity which contributes significantly in blue economy are historical in nature. Still the complexity of addressing women's contribution still persists. As the economy may be thriving but the same is not contributing enough to lead to holistic development of women empowerment. Participation starting from micro level can lead to holistic development for women as the same is required majorly in community set up.

Thus, to eliminate concerns about whether the working definition of the blue economy is not merely a repack of earlier global ocean policy experiments, we make an initial contribution by redefining the blue economy in the context of women empowerment. Here, the blue economy in the context of women empowerment is *'any ocean or coastal-based activity/ies that improve the socioeconomic well-being of coastal women in the short-run to progressively achieve holistic empowerment (social, economic, technological/scientific, psychological, political/institutional) in the long-run, across geographies including sustainable management of ocean resources, now and in the future.'*<sup>3</sup>

The above given definition is very powerful and also impactful as the same adequately suggests that in many manners if the women's participation not only ensured but also valued in the context of blue economy then the same is suitable for women empowerment. If the same will ensured it will lead to harmonization in the women's participation across all the activity that she will be contributing to. Reason being very simple as equity related to various resources of sea including goods and services the same can be proved as a catalyst for gender parity in management, decision making role and also to governance.

In the Republic of Kiribati, as an example of a small island developing State, 70% of households participate in the fisheries sector. Women are not socially expected to fish at sea due to the perceived dangers involved. Instead, they are heavily involved in shore-based activities and, increasingly, engaged in the marketing and sales of fish. Nevertheless, UNCTAD research indicates women struggle to participate in domestic and international trade. In The Gambia, as an example of a coastal state, 10% of the population depends on fish processing and marketing. UNCTAD research reveals that about 80% of fish processors are women. Here, women could benefit from increased access to equipment, credit and support services, or from improving their skills in marketing, or safety and hygiene, to meet EU market regulations.<sup>4</sup>

The idea of blue economy related to sustainable development goal is attributable to the goal no. 14 and also encompass through the goal of number 5 as well, as the first one suggest about the life below water and the second is attributed to the gender equality itself.

The main concern is related to contribution should be visible in nature made by women. The reason being simple although not contributing directly to the economic activity but many activities related to post harvesting and informal coastal services are done by the women but the same haven't been adequately recognised as shown into statistical report if done by the men. Basically this notion of not being recognised only lead to marginalization in every sphere involving and related to activity which may prove as a catalyst for many things such as being neglected when it comes to economic condition and work condition being accommodative to the need of women.

#### Contribution of Women's labour in aquatic activities

Women may not have directly contributed to the fisheries itself but in many art work segments without adequate contribution of women the growth will stand still. As the small scale artisans will remain as the mostly unnoticed but the same does denotes towards very interesting fact and that is women represents

<sup>3</sup> Bleischwitz, R., et al. (2025). *Linking blue economy to women's empowerment*.

<sup>4</sup> UNCTAD. (n.d.). *Blue economy opportunity*.

nearly 15 to 20 percent of the sector related to it. But the volume of share will also be increased if the contribution of women in post fisheries will also be recognised. As just like age old concept of cleaning and child care or drying and selling of fishes while also looking after for the house hold food security including child care usually go deliberately undermined. The same situation is also applicable to our country as these kinds of work have never been formally recognised and also although contributing significantly still the same has always been regarded as either as “part-time” or as matter of assistance rather than being recognised as full time employment.

Many measures have been taken by the European Union and many projects have also been launched, the project WINBLUE is also one of them.

The EU funded WINBLUE project tackles the issue of gender imbalance in blue careers. Started in May 2023 as a Women in the Blue Economy project supported by the European Maritime Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund (EMFAF), the project intends to facilitate women’s participation in operational and decision-making positions in five specific sectors:

1. circular blue bioeconomy and biotechnology
2. aquaculture and fisheries
3. offshore renewable energy
4. sustainable coastal tourism
5. cutting edge enabling technology (AI, Robotics, ICT) for protecting and restoring marine ecosystems.

The project will run a data analysis on gender status and will launch five WINBLUE labs. Partners will also engage stakeholders from the public and private sector in the following activities:

1. the co-design and implementation of gender equality plan models,
2. design and validation of upskilling and coaching programmes for women,
3. data collection to benchmark and monitor the evolution of gender inclusiveness in the blue economy,
4. identification and assessment of highly replicable good practices.<sup>5</sup>

Similar type of activities is also required to be made by our country as well as our country is having nine coastal state and around more than seven thousand kilometres of sea shore are, the similar activity plays significant role not only in contribution but also in sustainable inclusivity of women.

Post harvesting activities after fishing activity being completed which is also very prevalent in low to middle income countries then in those fish processing activity major share is contributed by the women. Although the share may lead to almost eighty percent but the still, they are deprived of social as well as economic protection.

In 2010 ICSF facilitated an international agreement, dubbed the “Shared Gender Agenda for Sustaining Life and Livelihoods in Fishing Communities”, adopted by a broad network of women in fisheries organizations, academics, practitioners, social activists and other civil society organizations. This Shared Agenda was used to incorporate gender concerns in the Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication adopted by the Food and Agriculture Organization in 2014 and also in the Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of

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<sup>5</sup> CINEA. (2023). WINBLUE.

Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests (2012). These guidelines recognize the vital role of women in small-scale fisheries and that achieving gender equality is of fundamental importance for sustainable fisheries.<sup>6</sup>

Aquaculture, also not presenting much different scenario than the sectors related to traditional fisheries practises. When it comes to more domestic type of fishing, for example, shrimp farming or finfish farming also inclusive of seed production at that time because the activity is regarded majorly as a part of part time or assistance type of services, hence, women are deprived of ownership rights and also becomes victim of being marginalised to technological integration. The same is very common in a traditional aquaculture activity and the same is reason for fatal gender gap in technology adoption. Because reason being very simple that women haven't been bestowed with the direct ownership rights makes them deprived of the decision making right and which eventually leads to productive and adaptive capacity which are also subject to weather condition as well.

#### Informal contribution in coastal tourism and maritime services

In recent years, the convergence of female entrepreneurship and maritime tourism has attracted much interest as a dynamic and developing subject area. The study of Gao and Iqbal (2023) reveals that the coastal regions have high visitor likelihoods because of their stunning natural scenery, vibrant cultural attractions, and extensive recreational opportunities. The potential for entrepreneurial endeavours in these coastal havens has increased along with the growth of the global tourism industry, with women emerging as critical players driving innovation and sustainability in this field. The intriguing history of the development of coastal tourism spans over centuries. According to Restani et al. (2022), the increased growth of coastal tourism is deeply based on the earliest stages of human civilisation when coastal regions were important for trade, cultural exchange, and nutrition. However, beach tourism started to develop at the peak of the 19th century. At the same time, several essential elements fueled this transition. The beginning of the industrial era in the 19th century brought improvements in transportation, including the invention of steamships and the growth of railways.

Besides their innovative role in developing maritime tourism, female entrepreneurs have faced various difficulties resulting from gender bias and conventional preconceptions (Ghouse et al., 2017). Financial access has consistently been a barrier for women looking to start or grow their maritime tourism business. The absence of female role models and mentors in the marine tourist industry has also hampered the professional advancement of potential female entrepreneurs (Freund & Hernandez-Maskivker, 2021). There are further impediments to entry and progress for women entrepreneurs because of the predominance of their male counterparts in networking opportunities and support networks. These issues are made worse by gender prejudices and stereotypes, which affect women's credibility in the field and prevent them from advancing to leadership positions. Ghouse et al. (2017) also found that gender-based biases may impair women's capacity to forge important economic alliances and agreements.<sup>7</sup>

Majority of the time such components of trade are heavily influenced by the cultural and societal value system which is heavily influenced by the community and perceived notions of that community. Despite of contributing heavily the role play of women is heavily limited just to entry – level, not being secured fully at work place which ultimately culminates to having very limited access to managerial, technologically advanced and mainstream entrepreneurial roles. The situation is highly evident in the Caribbean region as despite of having all the talents and potential still the role is majority of the time limited only to informal vending and cleaning roles.

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<sup>6</sup> UN Women Asia Pacific. (2015, September 18). "Women play a crucial role in marine environments and fisheries economies"

<sup>7</sup> F. Kiran "Navigating Waves of Innovation: Unveiling Female Entrepreneurship in Coastal Marine Tourism" International Journal of Social Science Research and Review 7, no. 2 (2024): 65–79

When it comes to larger operation level roles the representation of women is extremely insignificant as they are being deprived from having crane related operation and other engineering services. Recognising and giving special status to this informal economic activity will act as a precondition to the inclusivity at work place and also accommodative work environment.

#### Women's participation in marine conservation and blue carbon system

For centuries together women are known to have carried deep and region based knowledge system which have guided the communities about the tidal wetlands and helping to strengthen the ecosystem that also contributes to not just eco system but also proves as a beneficiary to protect and promote the blue carbon in their soils while protecting the same from the atmosphere and every type of climate change. But still the recognition to women for conservation is not being given as the same is considered as part of their daily household chores.

Often located near coastal communities, blue carbon ecosystems are widely accessible and routinely used by women and other community members for fishing and gleaning, which have led many blue carbon ecosystems to be socially identified as “women's spaces”. Women are recognized as the bearers of valuable knowledge on blue carbon ecosystems resource use and management and are critical to the successful conservation and restoration of Blue carbon ecosystems. Nonetheless, gender inequality is pervasive and research shows that women are often excluded from decision-making and typically receive disproportionately low benefits from blue carbon ecosystems management interventions (which broadly refers to placed-based programs or projects focused on conservation and restoration of Blue carbon ecosystems). In fact, studies of conservation initiatives have demonstrated the potential for negative social impacts of management interventions, such as a marked decline in the wellbeing indicators of women engaged in some projects participating in the Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD+) framework, limiting women's immediate freedoms to exercise agency, and increasing gender-based violence. These inequities and exclusions are particularly true for women from vulnerable groups (including Indigenous women) experiencing compounding marginalizations.<sup>8</sup>

However, the same is also proving another narrative that despite of structural exclusion if women's contribution can save and conserve the ecosystem systematic inclusion can change the canvas positively. Still largely exclusion is because of mainly due to lack of ownership as the same can also lead to exclusion from formal governance structure and monitoring on labour inputs. With the advent of bio diversity beyond national jurisdiction which is also known as high sea treaty as well, once again the focus has been shifted to the marine protected areas and also coastal management scheme, nevertheless such type of policies only either can be a reason for growth and push for the women inclusion and exact otherwise situation may lead to marginalisation of women's role heavily depending upon the implementation. In order to curb such type of situation it is necessary to have models which reserves the seat for women which ultimately leads to equitable benefit sharing and also higher compliance with the rules. Thus, incorporating gender sensitive practices in marine protected areas and blue carbon ecosystems lead to harmonised structure which is important for conservation with sustainable inclusive growth.

#### Way forward

Women are under represented various technical areas like science, technology, engineering and various other technical subjects but the same gap is more widened and significant when the fields are specifically related to oceans. When it comes to ratio of oceanographers and marine engineers the presence of women representation is negligible. The same is not just limited to representation but also extends and reflects in research agenda and policy integration which paint the very canvas of blue economy. If women's

<sup>8</sup> Yadao-Evans, W., Lopez, D.E., Aigrette, L. *et al.* Advancing interdisciplinary science of gender is key to the success of blue carbon initiatives. *Nat Commun* **16**, 10184 (2025)

participation is ensured at the senior level management, then the environmental safeguards and social equity may be at relatively higher side. In response to the same concern many efforts have been taken and one of the is earlier discussed as well, an initiative by European Union of WINBLUE. Nevertheless, our country is also not behind as the body of Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), which has produced a report on “A Blue Economy for Women’s Economic Empowerment,” emphasising upon for various scholarship and leadership programme. However, the benefit ca only be harnessed at its fullest extent when the participation of women feels natural not for the sake of policy and reservation as inclusivity comes from within and merely providing seat at the table have never served the purpose but sharing the same has always served.

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