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Summary

This paper focuses on highlighting the importance of field officers in implementation of community empowerment projects, with a focus on the Blue Empowerment (BE) Project. The BE project aims to enhance women's empowerment in the Blue Economy sector of Kwale and Kilifi counties in Kenya. This initiative, by ACTS in collaboration with Bahari CBO and other partners, seeks to overcome challenges faced by women in coastal regions by promoting Integrated Multi-Trophic Aquaculture (IMTA) involving seaweeds and fish. Field officers collect and analyze data on community needs and project impacts, providing valuable information that informs project strategies. Field officers are instrumental in promoting inclusive participation, actively encouraging women to engage in decision-making processes and project activities, fostering a sense of ownership and empowerment. Through community outreach and educational initiatives, field officers raise awareness about the significant contributions of women in the blue economy, advocating for their recognition and support. By fulfilling these roles, field officers play a crucial part in empowering women fishers, ensuring that their voices are heard and that they can fully engage in and benefit from the opportunities presented by the blue economy. However, despite their critical role, field officers encounter challenges such as limited access to resources, difficulties in participating in decision-making, and a lack of training opportunities. Addressing these barriers is essential for enabling field officers to effectively support women's participation and benefits in the blue economy.

Introduction

1.1 Background

For many years, local level project implementation officers, such as field officers, have acted as a link between the researchers/practitioners and the target communities. They play a critical role in mobilizing community members, facilitating capacity-building initiatives, creating awareness campaigns, conducting field surveys, and interpreting technical scientific terms into simple, understandable language that can easily be understood by target community members, especially those who have limited knowledge to decode scientific information. However, there is limited information on their perspective on women's empowerment, especially in the blue economy sector. This paper focuses on understanding the critical role of field officers in the Blue Empowerment project in Kwale and Kilifi Counties. The Blue Empowerment project aims to contribute to tackling barriers for the empowerment of fisher women in Kenya's coastal region through adoption of climate-smart integrated multi-trophic aquaculture (IMTA) of seaweeds and fish for improved livelihoods and climate resilience. The project has four main strands: contextualization, technology optimization, business optimization, and learning (see Box 1).

Box 1: Brief on the Blue Empowerment (BE) Project

About the Blue Empowerment (BE) Project

The Blue Empowerment project aims to tackle barriers for the empowerment of women in Kenya's coastal region through adoption of climate-smart integrated multi-trophic aquaculture (IMTA) of seaweeds and fish for improved livelihoods and resilience. The project has four main strands: contextualization, technology optimization, business optimization, and learning.



Contextualise

- Community driven research
- Co-innovation platform
- Data for decision making



Technology optimisation

- Pond culture
- Seaweed farms
- Cage culture
- Integrated aquaculture



Business optimisation

- Inclusive business models
- Business units
- Trade and market linkages



Learning

- Academic trainings
- Community demand driven trainings
- Learning exchange

The project recognizes the importance of empowering women. Women, particularly in the small-scale fisheries sector, are instrumental in various facets of the industry, from fish marketing to seaweed gathering and fish processing. Their involvement spans across fishing activities, marketing, financial management, and natural resource conservation efforts at the community level. By empowering women and enhancing their skills, the blue economy in Kwale and Kilifi counties stands to benefit significantly through increased economic activity in sectors such as fishing, tourism, and marine conservation. The critical importance of women's participation in the marine economy is further underscored by their substantial presence in labor within small-scale and marine fishing value chains, highlighting their pivotal role in ensuring food security, reducing poverty, and reinvesting in community development initiatives. Moreover, women's active engagement in decision-making processes concerning coastal and marine resource management bolsters sustainable development efforts, enriches conservation strategies, and ensures inclusive and gender-responsive infrastructure planning that fosters equitable opportunities for women in the blue economy. The consolidation of these insights underscores the urgent need to prioritize and leverage the synergistic potential of women's participation across various domains within the blue economy to advance sustainability and gender equality goals (see summary in Figure 1).

Economic growth

- Women play a great role in the marine environment and fisheries economies, specifically in the small-scale fisheries sector. Majority of women in their communities sell fish, either fresh or processed and others market the fish. While some can cross the traditional gender lines separating fishing from marketing, they end up owning and financing fishing canoes. Additionally, they are also involved in various activities, including gathering seaweed and shellfish, fishing, net weaving, repair of fishing nets and fishing canoes, processing, and selling at both local and regional markets. Further, women manage home finances and aquatic resources at the community level. Therefore, their participation in the blue economy can drive economic growth in Kwale and Kilifi counties. Through enhancing their skills and the creation of economic opportunities, women can make a significant contribution to several sectors, including fishing, tourism, and marine conservation (Stacey, 2019).

Poverty reduction

- Women make up around half of the labor employed in small-scale and marine fishing value chains (Pedroza-Gutiérrez, 2022)). Despite the variation in their responsibilities in the fishing industry among nations, sectors, locales, and communities, their significance in the industry is evident. This highlights the critical role that women play in guaranteeing food security and eliminating poverty. Women often invest their earnings back into their communities, improving overall standards of access to education and healthcare, hence reducing poverty levels in the society (Stefanie, 2023).and shellfish, fishing, net weaving, repair of fishing nets and fishing canoes, processing, and selling at both local and regional markets. Further, women manage home finances and aquatic resources at the community level. Therefore, their participation in the blue economy can drive economic growth in Kwale and Kilifi counties. Through enhancing their skills and the creation of economic opportunities, women can make a significant contribution to several sectors, including fishing, tourism, and marine conservation (Stacey, 2019).

Enhance Sustainable Development

- Women play a critical role in the preservation and sustainable use of coastal and marine resources in indigenous and local coastal communities. In essence, more inclusive and sustainable development is ensured when women participate in decision-making processes. Furthermore, their perspective can enhance methods for conservation and resource management in maritime environments (Barrios, 2020).

Gender equality

- Promoting women's empowerment in the BE project contributes to addressing gender disparities and ensures equal opportunities. It promotes gender-responsive infrastructure design and planning, which is essential for addressing the unique needs and priorities of women, such as considerations for adequate sanitary facilities and safety. By incorporating gender-sensitive approaches into infrastructure development, more women will participate in blue economy activities (Siddiqui, N., & Al-Farsi, J. 2023).

Figure 1: Importance of women empowerment.

1.2 Local level implementation officers

Local level implementation officers are commonly referred to as field officers. The imperative focus on the experiences of field officers within a project is crucial due to their pivotal role in bridging the gap between project design and on-the-ground realities. Field officers serve as invaluable conduits of contextual knowledge, offering nuanced insights into community dynamics, challenges, and the efficacy of implemented interventions. By acknowledging and thoroughly understanding their experiences, project leaders and policymakers can glean indispensable qualitative data that enriches the quantitative analyses typically utilized in project evaluation.

Furthermore, field officers are uniquely positioned to provide essential contextual information that is often inaccessible through conventional data collection methods. Their first-hand experiences can elucidate the intricacies of social, cultural, and structural dynamics within the targeted communities, ultimately guiding the formulation of culturally sensitive and locally relevant strategies. This is particularly pertinent in environmental sustainability projects where community engagement and support are paramount for long-term success.

Moreover, an emphasis on the experiences of field officers is indispensable in addressing systemic challenges they encounter, such as limited access to resources, insufficient training, and constrained autonomy. Recognizing and addressing these challenges is not only fundamental for enhancing the effectiveness of ongoing projects but also for fostering a resilient and empowered cadre of field officers capable of catalyzing enduring change.

1.3 Challenges and opportunities for women empowerment

The blue economy presents significant opportunities for sustainable development and growth. Nonetheless, women often face disproportionate challenges, which limits their full participation and benefiting from this sector. This section explores in detail the limitations and obstacles that hinder women's participation and empowerment in the blue economy sector. These challenges range from cultural and social norms to structural and institutional barriers. Gaining an understanding of these obstacles is crucial for developing effective strategies to promote gender equality and women's empowerment in the blue economy sector.

1.3.1 Social, Cultural, and Religion Barriers

Social attitudes restrict women from being in certain spaces. Discriminatory gender and social norms prohibit women from participating in certain aspects of the Blue Economy, creating an additional burden on them. For transformative change, investments, and innovations to be realized, it is not enough to simply promote jobs for women in the sector.

Culture, religion, and social tradition have a significant influence on what women can do and the challenges they face. Women's access to natural resources has historically been restricted due to sociocultural factors; which have frequently been imposed on activities and fishing methods that are viewed as traditionally feminine, such as gleaning, seaweed farming, mud-crab fishing, oyster farming, inland-water fishing, and fishing in small pools of water along rivers .The conventional gender responsibilities of reproduction, productivity, caring, and nurturing are expected of women in many societies, which might restrict their capacity to participate in activities like fishing, which often require long hours away from home. As a result, women are not expected to serve in management committees in the coastal culture. (Finch, 2022)

Additionally, traditional beliefs, taboos, and superstitions also prevent women from fishing in the sea or accessing some spaces for traditional fishing-related rituals. Clothing in South Africa, menstruation in Kenya and common beliefs that women are bearers of 'bad luck' prevent women from fishing at sea under the guise of not catching fish. Essentially, fishing has traditionally been seen as a male-dominated profession, leading to stereotypes that women are less capable or suitable for such work. (Pedroza-Gutiérrez, 2019)

The cultural patriarchal system in Coastal Kenya (including Kilifi and Kwale) sees men as the head of household and responsible for making all decisions in the community. The traditional view of men being the leaders and controllers of all activities affects the management status of the fishing communities and does not give women the

same opportunity, leading to women being excluded from participating in the management of fisheries resources. The role played by patriarchy in the management of the fisheries is structured from the communities' cultural norms, which shapes the level of women's involvement in the fisheries' activities. For example, at the landing sites, fishermen believe culturally that it's bad luck for a woman to see or come across a fisherman going fishing, and if it happens, he should not go fishing on that particular day. In addition, men do not even want women in fisheries to come into contact with the fishing vessels and gear, which is perceived as a bad omen. This has contributed more to women's mistreatment at the fish landing sites, especially women fishers who are harassed because they want to go fishing and acquire fish for themselves.

1.3.2 Decision-making and leadership.

Women's agency in decision-making, leadership, and collective action in the fisheries and aquaculture sector has been a growing importance and recognition topic in recent years (Freeman, 2022). Historically, women's roles and contributions in these sectors have been overlooked or undervalued. It is important to acknowledge that women still face significant challenges and barriers to fully realize their agency in the fisheries and aquaculture sectors. Gender inequalities persist regarding access to resources, credit, training, and decision-making positions. Social and cultural norms can limit women's mobility and participation in public spaces. (Pereira, 2024).

Women may exercise agency in a variety of contexts, including both individuals and as members of a family, and can engage in politics, organizations, markets, and other formal and informal structures (Venugopal, 2021). One aspect of women's agency in the fisheries and aquaculture sectors is their involvement in decision-making processes. Women have traditionally faced barriers that include cultural norms, lack of access to education and information, and limited representation in leadership positions (Islam, 2023). Consequently, these barriers limit women's participation in decision-making forums, such as community meetings, cooperative societies, and policy-making bodies. Research conducted in Homabay County, Kenya, revealed that tradition does not allow women to possess property, particularly in the fishing industry, where males predominate in the decision-making process about fish production. (Onyang'o, 2021)

In general, women involved in aquaculture and small-scale fisheries (SSF) activities need to be able to influence decisions that affect their livelihoods. There are examples of women engaging in collective action and mobilization (e.g., social networks, unions, cooperatives, self-help groups) to improve working conditions, advocate for their rights, and increase their participation in decision making (Kusakabe, 2022)

1.3.3 Access to and control of capital

Access to and control over resources are critical factors influencing women's agency and participation in aquaculture and fisheries. Women often face significant challenges in accessing and controlling resources that provide capital and this limit their economic opportunities and decision-making power. (Gopal,2020) Like other economic activities, venturing into the blue economy requires investment in capital in terms of land, finances, and human resource capacity. In the coastal region of Kenya, women have numerous challenges, particularly, those related to land rights and inheritance, which limit their access to the prerequisite land, finance, and capability capital. Land ownership, whether individual or communal, does not benefit women since it is patrilineal, meaning that fathers divide their property among their sons but not their daughters. In addition to posing a threat to women's means of livelihood, unjust land tenure systems also place a heavy emotional and identity burden on them because land is an integral part of Kenyan heritage. Women's rights over land were restricted starting in the colonial era, and their primary responsibility was to take care of the family and generate food. As a result, women were prohibited from having complete ownership over land and could only use it for this purpose. Consequently, as heads of households or as members of the household, women suffer an increased degree of undue disadvantage regarding the use, access to, and/or control of land and other valuable property. Generally, land is an emotive issue for women in fisheries in Kenya, majority of whom still suffer the consequences of lack of access to and control of property, leading to economic insecurity. Women's discrimination against equal property rights puts them at a higher risk of poverty, domestic violence and diseases such as HIV/AIDS as they struggle to pursue other means of economic survival. Land access and property ownership is crucial to gain access to markets and better standards of living for women in fisheries. It is also particularly important for women and girls who are heads of households whether by circumstance or choice. Lack of land and property ownership for women in fisheries is not only an economic barrier but also legal obstacles to engaging in aquaculture economic activities.

Furthermore, access to credit and financial services is a very important enabler for women's participation in the fisheries sector. Women in the aquaculture and fisheries sector often face difficulties in obtaining credit to invest in their businesses or acquire necessary equipment and inputs (Kusakabe ,2022). Financial institutions may have biased lending practices that favor men, viewing women as higher-risk borrowers. Additionally, women's limited control over property and land ownership can hinder their access to collateral needed for securing loans. This lack of access to credit and financial resources restricts women's ability to expand their businesses, invest in sustainable practices, and increase their incomes (Singh, 2021)

Additionally, women often face unequal access to training and extension services, which are essential for acquiring technical knowledge and skills in aquaculture and

fisheries (Adam, 2023). Due to social conventions that prevent them from engaging with male extension personnel and a shortage of female extension personnel, women may have lesser access to knowledge and skills, as well as extension services needed for fish culture, hatchery management, or fish marketing in aquaculture. Limited access to training programs and extension services can create a gender gap in knowledge and innovation, restricting women's ability to adopt sustainable and efficient practices, improve productivity, and enhance their competitiveness in the sector.

1.3.4 Policies and governance

Globally, policies and governance substantially impact the management, control, and access of fisheries resources. Gender equality policies and governance are crucial in promoting equitable and inclusive development in the fisheries and aquaculture sector (Adam, 2022). However, several challenges exist in implementing and ensuring the effectiveness of these policies. One challenge is the lack of gender-responsive policies and regulatory frameworks. Gender considerations are often overlooked or insufficiently integrated into fisheries and aquaculture policies, plans, and regulations. This results in a gender-blind approach that fails to address the specific needs, roles, and challenges faced by women in the sector. Inadequate gender-responsive policies hinder women's access to resources, decision-making, and economic opportunities, perpetuating gender inequalities (Matikainen,2023)

1.3.5 Technology and Infrastructure

Technologies and innovations have been a major engine for fisheries over the past several decades; and will continue to be so with the advent of sensitization on climate change and pandemics. The prevailing social perception, however, is that “technology is masculine.” Women have been largely excluded from technology and displaced from their traditional roles by technological breakthroughs such as mechanization. (Agarwal,2022). In most cases, this position is more perceptual than practical and may require an intentional capacity strengthening to change the perception of the community and the consequential behavioral change.

Even though it rarely comes up, almost all physical technologies in blue economy such as the diesel engines and fuel that power fishing vessels, as well as the machines that fabricate nets, equipment, and materials like nylon, steel, and fiberglass, have been developed by men in traditionally masculine sectors (LiVecchi ,2019). Men typically end up being the main beneficiaries of disseminating these technologies, while women play a relatively small part in their local uptake in the Blue Economy; they find it difficult to learn about and access them. Women-targeted interventions may not benefit women, especially once the benefits become apparent as men tend to take over (Williams,2023).

Roles of and strategies by field officers in supporting and sustaining women empowerment in the blue economy sector

2.1 Roles of field officers in bridging empowerment challenges

In the dynamic realm of sustainable development initiatives, the pivotal role of field officers as conduits between research entities and local communities cannot be overstated. These field officers serve as linchpins, facilitating seamless communication and trust-building processes crucial for project success. A case in point is the Blue Empowerment Project, operating across Kilifi North, Kilifi South, Msambweni, and Lunga lunga sub-counties. Here, field officers diligently relay project advancements, upcoming engagements, and decisions to community members, ensuring transparency and alignment with local needs. By orchestrating dialogues, documenting life stories, conducting gender training, and fostering collaborative community-led initiatives like SACCOs, these officers not only foster trust but also integrally enhance cooperation, crucial for the sustained success of such projects. Through their concerted efforts to engage and inform the community, field officers are instrumental in nurturing durable relationships that underpin project outcomes and ensure long-term sustainability.

- **Liaison:** Field officers play a key role as intermediaries between research organizations and local communities. They help keep communication smooth and build trust. They inform the community members about project progress, upcoming activities, and decisions made by the project team leaders. For instance, in the four sub counties namely: Kilifi North, Kilifi South, Msambweni and Lunga lunga, Blue empowerment project field officers, keep updating the target community members on various ongoing project activities, including documentation of life histories, gender training, policy dialogues, community dialogue, and formation of community-led SACCOs. By organizing meetings and providing updates schedules, field officers ensure transparency and community involvement. They also ensure that the project aligns with local needs and expectations. As a result, these initiatives foster trust and cooperation, which are essential for the successful implementation of the Blue Empowerment Project. By keeping the community well informed and engaged, field officers help build strong, supportive relationships that enhance project outcomes and sustainability.

- **Trainings and Development:** Field officers play an important role in empowering women by offering essential training and technical assistance. They develop training modules that encompass business model development, policy dialogues and gender sensitivity sessions. For instance, in 2023, a field officer from Kilifi South visited a community member, to document her impact story related to blue empowerment. The community member shared that she had been a fish trader for a long time, a business that enabled her to educate her children, construct rental houses, established a freshwater point, and co-owned a boat as a group, demonstrating her dedication to the blue economy project. Field officers gather such insights and report back to project leaders who then design tailor-made training programs to meet members' interests and needs. As a result, field officers help women adopt sustainable practices, improve their livelihoods and contribute to the blue economy. These efforts not only enhance women's capabilities but also promote sustainable development within their communities.
- **Ensuring Inclusive Participation:** Field officers play a crucial role in ensuring that women's voices are heard, especially in regions where cultural and religious norms restrict women from speaking in the presence of men. In Kwale, Msambweni Sub County, a woman raised a concern during a community meeting but was silenced by two men who claimed that women should not speak where men are present due to religious beliefs. The field officer intervened, asserting that women have the right to speak and emphasizing that the Blue Empowerment Project specifically targets women. To further ensure inclusive participation, the field officer facilitated turn-taking in mixed gender meetings, ensuring that all voices were heard and recorded. This approach not only empowers women but also ensures their concerns and insights are integrated into project planning and decision-making processes. By promoting inclusive participation, field officers help create a more equitable and supportive environment, enriching the project's outcomes with diverse perspectives.
- **Data Collection:** Field officers are instrumental in gathering intended data which is analyzed to determine the specific needs and challenges faced by women in the blue economy sector. They use data collection tools such as Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) and Focus Group Discussions (FDGs) to collect qualitative data. In May 2024, four field officers for the Blue Empowerment Project from the four sub counties conducted KIIs with various stakeholders, including NGO members, environmentalists, village chairmen, chiefs and Beach Management Unit (BMU) members. (They gathered insights on issues such as market access, financial constraints and social barriers faced by women). The data collected was then reported to the Project office for analysis and action. This data collection is crucial for designing targeted initiatives that address women's specific needs and promote their empowerment.

- **Raising Awareness About Women’s Roles:** Field officers play a crucial role in raising awareness about the importance of women’s contributions to the blue economy. They ensure that tasks and payments are distributed equally, regardless of gender, fostering an environment of fairness and respect. In Lunga lunga Sub- County, male attendees at a BE project meeting raised concerns because they were compensated for transport equally with women claiming superiority. The field officer intervened, explaining that men and women are equal and deserve equal compensation. By promoting gender equality and recognizing the important work women do, field officers help shift societal perceptions and create a more inclusive environment. They organize community events to highlight women’s roles and advocate for gender equality. These efforts challenge their beliefs and promote a culture of equality, ensuring that women’s contributions are valued. By advocating for women’s rights and highlighting their contributions, field officers help build a supportive and equitable community where women can thrive and fully participate in the blue economy.

2.2 Strategies employed by field officers in promoting empowerment.

In the dynamic sphere of sustainable development initiatives, the critical function of field officers as conduits between research entities and local communities emerge as a linchpin for successful project outcomes. Specifically, their role in understanding the specific needs and challenges faced by women in the blue economy sector is paramount. Through meticulously organized meetings with local women, community leaders, and stakeholders, field officers delve into discussions encompassing issues of resource accessibility, market opportunities, and social barriers affecting the welfare of women. For instance, conducting a meeting in a coastal village with women engaged in seaweed farming highlights the profound impact of these interactions. By attentively listening to the women’s challenges, field officers can discern prevalent issues and viable solutions. Furthermore, these meetings serve as platforms for women to voice their concerns and actively engage in decision-making processes, facilitating tailored interventions that empower women and foster inclusivity within the blue economy. This comprehensive approach not only optimizes project efficacy but also cultivates a supportive environment conducive to the advancement of women within the sector.

- **Determining Specific Needs and Challenges:** Field officers conduct meetings to understand the specific needs and challenges faced by women in the blue economy sector. These meetings involve discussions with local women, community leaders and other stakeholders to gather insights on various issues such as access to resources, market opportunities and social barriers that affect their welfare. In a coastal village, a field officer organizes a meeting with

women in seaweed farming to discuss their difficulties in accessing markets. By listening to their concerns, the field officer can identify common problems and potential solutions. These meetings also serve as a platform for women to voice their opinions and participate in decision making processes. The information gathered from these meetings is crucial for designing targeted interventions that address the specific needs of women, ensuring their active participation and empowerment in the blue economy. This approach not only enhances the effectiveness of projects but also fosters a more inclusive and supportive environment for women.

“Initiatives such as the Blue Empowerment Project specifically target the barriers faced by women in the blue economy, promoting gender equality and enhancing women’s roles in decision-making processes.”

- **Develop Training and Mentoring Opportunities:** Field officers develop training, mentoring and educational opportunities to build women’s knowledge and skills. This includes teaching business management skills, gender training and policy dialogues. For example, during the business unit training activity that took place in December 2023 in Kwale, Shimoni and Kilifi, Mnarani, field officers mobilized group representatives to participate in sessions on business units. Additionally, they connect women with experienced professionals who can offer guidance, support and valuable career advice. Women entrepreneurs can be paired with successful business owners who can mentor them on scaling their businesses and navigating market challenges. By providing these resources, field officers help women enhance their capabilities, boost their confidence, and increase their economic opportunities. This support network not only empowers women to succeed in their ventures but also promotes sustainable practices in the blue economy. The continuous learning and mentorship provided by field officers are essential for fostering long term growth and resilience among women involved in the Blue Empowerment Project.

“Programs that offer training and resources, like the AGRIFI Fish Project, help communities adopt new technologies and improve their livelihoods. This includes developing local hatcheries and feed production, which enhance fish production and food security.”

- **Stakeholder Engagement:** Field Officers involve various stakeholders such as community leaders, government officials, NGOs and private sector partners. They facilitate meetings and collaborations to ensure that women’s voice is heard in decision making. This involvement helps to advocate for policies that support gender equality and sustainable practices. Field officers organize discussions with local government representatives and women to discuss policy challenges needed to improve women’s access to fishing licenses in the blue economy. By bringing different stakeholders together, field officers create a

platform for dialogue and cooperation, ensuring that women’s perspectives are considered in policy and program development. This collaborative approach helps build consensus and support for initiatives that promote gender equality and environmental sustainability. By actively involving women and other stakeholders in these processes, field officers help to create more inclusive and effective policies that address the unique challenges faced by women in the blue economy. This fosters a supportive environment where women thrive and contribute to sustainable development.

“Projects like Mikoko Pamoja and Vanga Blue Forest emphasize active participation of local communities in conservation efforts. This engagement fosters ownership and responsibility, leading to sustainable practices.”

- **Fact Finding:** Field officers conduct surveys and interviews to understand local contexts to identify barriers to women’s participation in the blue economy. This research helps in creating specific plans and strategies that can be shared with stakeholders to encourage lasting, eco-friendly habits and empowerment. Field officers conduct Key Informant Interview (KIIs) with community leaders and other stakeholders. These key informants can provide additional insights into cultural or structural barriers that women face. The data collected from these surveys and interviews are analyzed to identify common challenges and potential solutions. Project leaders then use this information to develop targeted interventions, such as providing necessary solutions or organizing training sessions on sustainable practices. By understanding and addressing the specific barriers to women’s participation, field officers help create an enabling environment that supports women’s active involvement and leadership in the blue economy.

“Projects like the COSME Project utilize nature-based solutions, such as mangrove restoration and sustainable seaweed farming, to address climate adaptation and biodiversity conservation. These approaches not only benefit the environment but also provide economic opportunities for local communities.”

- **Community Outreach and Awareness:** Field officers organize community outreach programs, awareness campaigns and informational sessions to highlight the importance of women’s roles in the Blue Economy. These activities aim to educate the community about gender equality and the contributions of women to sustainable development. For example, field officers mobilized representatives of community groups for gender training that happened in December 2023. These outreach efforts help to change societal perceptions by promoting respect and recognition for women’s work. By raising awareness, field officers foster a more inclusive and supportive community environment. These programs also encourage more women to participate in blue economy activities, knowing their contributions are valued and respected. Through

continuous community engagement and education, field officers help build a foundation for gender equality and sustainable practices in the blue economy.

“Successful projects often involve multiple stakeholders, including government agencies, NGOs, and community-based organizations. The KEMFSED project exemplifies this by collaborating with the Kenyan government and the World Bank to strengthen fisheries management.”

2.3 Strategies employed by field officers to sustain impact of women empowerment.

To enhance the effectiveness of empowerment strategies in coastal and marine projects, field officers should consider fostering ownership, promoting equity, promoting nature-based solutions, training provisions, and building partnerships (see Figure 2).

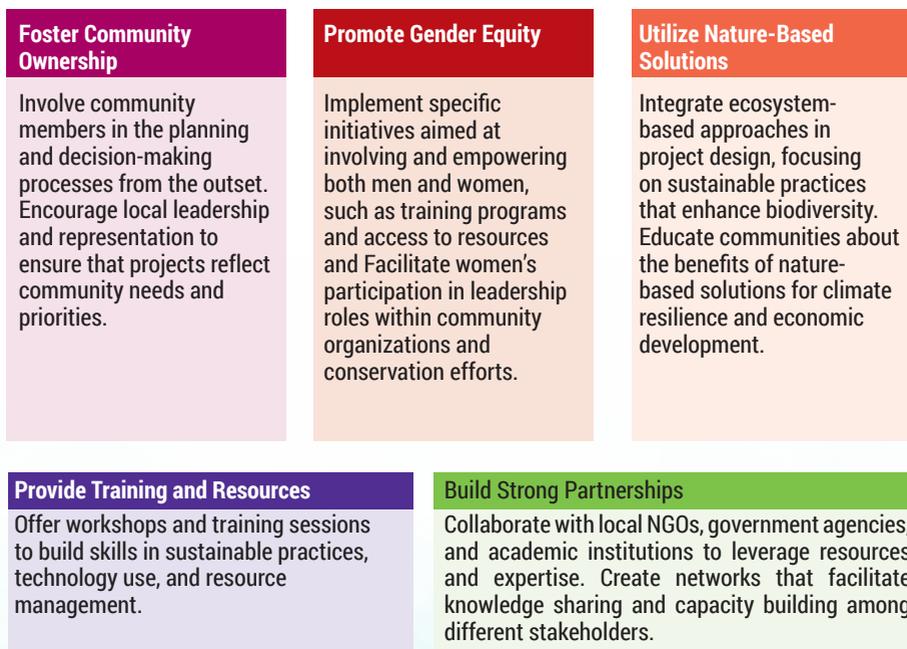


Figure 2: Strategies to sustain impact of empowerment.

Supporting the work of field officers to enhance empowerment

The field officers undoubtedly play critical roles, and have various recommendations based on hands-on experiences working with various partners, and the community. The emerging question is on, how can the stakeholders enhance the efforts of the field officers' work? This paper makes reflections on two main avenues of supporting the sustainability of the efforts, comprising policy processes, and promoting advocacy.

3.1 What policy processes to support

To improve women's empowerment in the blue economy in these counties, policymakers should implement a comprehensive strategy with the following key components:

3.1.1 Implement targeted financial support mechanisms.

The main challenge is that many women in Kwale and Kilifi lack the necessary capital to start or expand their own small businesses in the growing blue economy sectors, such as fishing and aquaculture. Limited access to financial resources hinders women's economic development and participation in the blue economy. Without microfinance, savings accounts, and affordable credit, they struggle to seize opportunities in this sector, which affects their ability to invest in livelihoods and skills. To address this issue, implementing targeted financial support mechanisms is essential. Improved access to financial services empowers women to start or expand businesses, invest in technology, and engage more actively in the blue economy. Additionally, greater access to banking and insurance can help lift coastal communities out of poverty. When women can effectively manage their finances and build assets, it leads to higher household incomes, reduced vulnerabilities, and sustainable regional growth (Goh, 2012).

3.1.2 Skills development and training programs

Government leaders should create special training programs for women, and formulating policies that support the implementation of tailored training programs to build technical expertise, entrepreneurial capabilities, and leadership abilities in the blue economy sector is crucial. Many women in Kwale and Kilifi don't have the

skills to fully take part in the growing blue economy sectors. This is because of the culture and not being exposed to these kinds of jobs. For example, many women can't swim or don't know how to operate boats or manage fishing. They also often struggle to develop leadership skills that could help them get better jobs in this field. This skills gap and lack of access to training and development programs hinders women's ability to fully engage and benefit from the economic opportunities presented by the blue economy and often end up with less important roles (Mwakyambiki, 2024).

3.1.3 Mainstream gender-responsive policies

This refers to the process of ensuring that gender perspectives and attention to the goal of gender equality are central to all activities, including policy development, legislation, resource allocation, planning, implementation, and monitoring of programs and projects (Hannan, 2022). Ensure that the needs, experiences, and priorities of people of all genders are consistently considered, addressed, and empowered in blue economy programs and policies. This means that the development of rules, laws, or plans for the ocean economy, should take into consideration how they affect both men and women. Essentially, it ensures that women's experiences and needs are just as important as men's. In the past, many ocean economy plans didn't really think about what women needed or wanted. Generally, formulation of policies that consider everyone, can help create a fairer system where women can participate more in making decisions and leadership roles in the blue economy (Harper, (2017).

3.1.4 Strengthening the enforcement of laws and regulations that protect women's rights and promote gender equality.

When laws and regulations are put in place to protect women's rights and promote gender equality, weak enforcement and lack of accountability often undermine their effectiveness (Darmstadt, 2019). For example, women who sell cooked fish (mama karangas) in Kilifi and Kwale face discrimination, harassment, unequal pay, and limited opportunities despite the existence of protective legislation. Gender-based violence, such as domestic abuse and sexual harassment, may persist in these communities due to lax enforcement of relevant laws. Strengthening enforcement mechanisms is important towards a more equitable and inclusive society, where the rights and contributions of women are fully recognized and respected (Khalatbari, A., 2024).

3.1.5 Gender responsive Infrastructure

This is the development and design of infrastructure that considers the specific needs, preferences, and challenges of both women and men (Reed, 2007). Ocean spaces in Kwale and Kilifi counties do not have facilities that accommodate the needs

of women, such as safe and private spaces, childcare options, and proper sanitation facilities. The design and layout of physical, social, and economic infrastructure in coastal communities may not consider the specific mobility patterns, safety concerns, and access requirements of women. The gender-responsive infrastructure considers the diverse needs, preferences, and challenges of people of all genders by incorporating safe and private workspaces, childcare facilities, and suitable sanitation options in fishing and seaside activities to enable greater participation and comfort for women. By prioritizing a gender-responsive approach to infrastructure development, policymakers and community leaders can help create more equitable, accessible, and inclusive environments that support the full participation and well-being of people of all genders (Naher, 2023).

3.2 What advocacy efforts to prioritise

The field officers serve as frontline advocates, working directly with local communities and key stakeholders to drive policy changes and create an enabling environment for women's empowerment in the blue economy through the following initiatives:

3.2.1 Stakeholder Engagement

Field officers organize meetings comprising of various stakeholders, including women in the blue economy, local communities, civil society organizations, government agencies, and NGOs, to have open discussions about the challenges women face, what they need to succeed, and potential solutions to support women's empowerment (Alonso, 2019).

“The field officers demonstrate the practice of stakeholder engagement in mainstream gender-responsive policies by holding check-in meetings with the local community groups involved in the project once every month. Additionally, during project activities like the gender training meeting held in December 2023, the women from Kilifi and Kwale communities were actively engaged to share their viewpoints and suggestions. Through the forum, women expressed the need for more gender training to further empower women in the sector.”

3.2.2 Awareness Initiatives

Launching targeted awareness campaigns to highlight the importance of women's participation and leadership in the blue economy aimed at challenging gender stereotypes, promoting role models, and educating the public on the benefits of women's empowerment in the sector (Österblom, 2023). These targeted initiatives can take various forms to reach diverse audiences and create meaningful impact. The field officers play a crucial role in creating awareness by directly engaging with local communities. They visit community groups and facilitate focus group

discussions (FGDs) and key informant interviews (KIIs). During these sessions, the community members can share their experiences, challenges, and perspectives. The field officers then use these interactions to educate the communities about the blue economy and the project's goals of empowering women. This direct engagement inspires more women to come forward and participate in the blue economy sector. Additionally, field officers also share success stories and profiles of women leaders, innovators, and entrepreneurs in the blue economy. This highlights the impact of BE project initiatives on the community, helps to challenge prevailing gender stereotypes, and demonstrates the wide range of opportunities available for women.

“An excellent example is the Kilifi South field officer, Meali, who has collaborated on other projects like the blue economy landscape assessment in Kilifi and Kwale counties. During these assessments, she encouraged the women of the Matuga Arts group to consider careers in the marine sector, such as diving. She was able to serve as a role model, being a Muslim woman herself who is also a diver. This inspired the women and showed them that their cultural backgrounds do not have to limit their participation in the blue economy. These awareness initiatives are crucial for the policies and programs that promote gender equality.”

3.2.3 Collaboration with Local NGOs and Research Institutions

Collaborating with private organizations operating in the blue economy is an important strategy to adopt inclusive practices that support women's empowerment (Aniekwe, 2012).

“The Blue Empowerment project has demonstrated the value of such partnerships. Specifically, the project's collaboration with Bahari CBO and Sea Moss, a private sector company, has been crucial to its success. Sea Moss has provided training to the women in the project on various seaweed farming techniques. Importantly, Sea Moss also buys the seaweed produced by the women farmers, creating a reliable market channel for their products. Similarly, the partnership between Bahari CBO and Kenya Industrial Research and Development Institute (KIRDI) has also positively impacted the project. KIRDI has provided technical advice on innovative Integrated Multi-Trophic Aquaculture (IMTA) systems, where seaweed, fish, and other marine species can be cultivated together. This has increased the income sources for the local communities and created a more sustainable model. Beyond the technical support, these collaborations have also generated employment opportunities, such as security guards and maintenance personnel for the aquaculture systems.”

3.2.4 Mentorship and Networking

Established platforms and initiatives enable women in the blue economy to build professional networks, share knowledge, and access mentorship, which creates a more nurturing ecosystem where women can learn from each other, access valuable resources, and create pathways for women to access resources and opportunities (Karani, 2022).

“An example of this approach from the Blue Empowerment project in Kilifi and Kwale counties is that the project organized a policy dialogue and gender training session that brought together women from these counties. This cross-county exchange provided a platform for the women to build professional networks, share knowledge, and access mentorship opportunities. During the session, the women from Kilifi shared their success stories and experiences in the mariculture sector. This was highly motivating for the women from Kwale, many of whom were not as involved or empowered in the blue economy. This interaction and exposure helped break down the barriers and lack of confidence that some of the Kwale women faced, often resulting from being undermined by men in their communities. The active participation of women from Kibuyuni in Kwale County in the blue empowerment activities such as seaweed farming also inspired women from Kilifi County. By establishing this dedicated platform for mentorship and networking, the Blue Empowerment project created a more nurturing ecosystem where women could learn from each other’s experiences, access valuable resources, and create new pathways for participating in and succeeding in the blue economy.”

4

Conclusion

Field Officer's perspective on women empowerment in the blue economy sector, as illustrated by the case study of the Blue Empowerment Project in Kwale and Kilifi Counties, underscores the critical role that targeted initiatives play in fostering gender equity and sustainable development. By directly engaging with local communities, field officers are positioned to identify barriers to women's participation and develop strategies that enhance their leadership and economic involvement. These findings highlight that empowering field officers not only benefits them individually but also strengthens the broader community and contributes to the resilience and sustainability of the blue economy. Moving forward, the call for strengthened collaboration between field officers, practitioners, academia, and policymakers is crucial. By aligning their efforts and drawing on the insights from this field-based perspective, stakeholders can work together to create lasting change and ensure that women can fully participate and benefit from the blue economy in Kwale and Kilifi counties. Ultimately, empowering women in this sector is not only a matter of gender equity but an important driver of inclusive and sustainable economic growth in these coastal communities.

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