

Blue Empowerment Project: Transformative Gender Training for Sustainable Development

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Introduction

The blue economy holds profound significance for coastal women, representing a pathway to sustainable development, economic empowerment, and social progress. Coastal communities, often home to a significant proportion of women engaged in traditional fisheries-associated activities and small-scale enterprises, are intricately connected to the maritime environment. The blue economy, which encompasses the sustainable use of water resources (including ocean resources) for economic growth, recognizes the pivotal role that coastal women play in this ecosystem¹. Promoting blue economy inclusive policies and initiatives that empower women in fisheries, aquaculture, and related sectors would unlock opportunities for these women to enhance their livelihoods. This can involve providing access to training, financial resources, and technology, enabling them to participate more effectively in value chains and decision-making processes². Moreover, the sustainable management of coastal resources under the blue economy framework ensures the preservation of ecosystems, securing the long-term well-being of coastal communities and safeguarding women's vital roles in these environments. In essence, supporting the blue economy not only catalyzes economic growth but also fosters gender equality and resilience, recognizing coastal women as key

contributors to both local prosperity and the sustainable development of the broader maritime landscape³.

The Blue Empowerment Project is a pioneering initiative focused on gender transformative action research, including training to promote inclusivity, equity, and empowerment within diverse communities. This comprehensive Initiative goes beyond traditional gender frameworks, emphasizing the significance of addressing gender-related challenges within the broader context of sustainable development. The project aims to empower individuals, organizations, and communities through a multidimensional approach by fostering gender-sensitive attitudes, dismantling stereotypes, and creating an environment conducive to equal opportunities. This Blue Empowerment project info brief presents insights from gender training sessions during the Integrated Multitrophic Aquaculture (IMTA) Cage system launch. The insights will inform the country on approaches to safeguarding women's future. The insights were gathered through broad consultations with facilitators, dialogue captured during knowledge exchange workshops, and a desk-based review of published and unpublished literature.

3. <https://nairobi-convention.org/clearinghouse/sites/default/files/Women%20of%20the%20Blue%20Economy%20-%20Gender%20Equity%20and%20Participation%20in%20the%20Management%20of%20Water%20Resources-Lessons%20from%20the%20Coast%20of%20Kenya%20and%20Somalia.pdf>

1. <https://ir.library.ku.ac.ke/bitstream/handle/123456789/24526/Role%20of%20Women%20in%20Blue%20>
2. Ibid



Women on their way to view the IMTA technology following the Blue Empowerment Training session.

Key Insights

Differentiated gender roles across the blue economy investments/initiatives

According to historical, cultural, and social conventions, the blue economy, which comprises all economic activities associated with oceans and waters, frequently demonstrates gender-based disparities. Historically, males have held most positions in maritime industries, including shipping, offshore energy extraction, and fisheries. The existence of this gender bias may be traced back to long-standing prejudices and preconceived notions concerning physical prowess and the arduous requirements of maritime labor. As more women enter the blue economy, these preconceived notions are being challenged, contributing to the diversification of roles. The growing involvement of women in fisheries management, marine conservation, and research endeavours in certain regions underscores the possibility of establishing a blue economy that is more equitable and inclusive concerning gender.

However, promoting gender equality in the blue economy continues to face obstacles. Cultural biases, discriminatory practices, and restricted access to resources and training continue to impede the full participation of women¹. Although traditionally male-dominated, women frequently encounter skepticism and opposition in these roles. Efforts to tackle these challenges encompass implementing gender-sensitive policies, providing equitable educational and skill development opportunities, and cultivating a supportive work environment. By recognizing and deconstructing gender stereotypes and biases, the blue economy can leverage the abilities and contributions of all individuals, regardless of gender, thereby promoting a maritime industry that is more sustainable and equitable².

Understanding of gender is fragmented and affects gender action

The fragmented understanding of gender across cultures, societies, and even communities substantially impacts the impact of gender-related initiatives and actions. Gender is a multifaceted and intricate social construct that extends beyond its binary nature and incorporates many identities, roles, and expectations. The lack of consensus regarding gender is due to preconceptions, cultural norms, and stereotypes that are profoundly rooted and influence how individuals perceive it³. Fragmentation is apparent in the divergent definitions and interpretations of gender roles, rights, and responsibilities; consequently, disparities arise in various communities' approaches to gender matters.

Particularly concerning gender policies and actions, the effects of a fragmented understanding of gender are severe. Criticism or lack of resonance may be encountered by proj-

ects seeking to advance gender equality that fail to resonate with the local or cultural perception of gender. Moreover, the lack of unity in comprehension could inadvertently result in the omission or disregard of specific gender identities or experiences, thereby compromising the efficacy and inclusiveness of interventions of gender. There is an increasing demand for a more holistic and intersectional framework concerning gender, which considers the multifaceted manners in which it intersects with social classes, races, and sexual orientations, to tackle this matter effectively. By cultivating a more sophisticated and all-encompassing comprehension of gender, endeavours and behaviors can be formulated to align more effectively with the varied experiences of individuals, thereby making a more substantial contribution to advancing gender equality.

Sociocultural norms and practices influence decision-making.

The influence of sociocultural practices and norms on the decision-making processes of a society or community is substantial. These norms comprise a wide variety of shared beliefs, values, and customs passed down from generation to generation, impacting how individuals perceive and evaluate others⁴. Prevalent norms and expectations concerning suitable conduct, duties, and positions of authority, which are determined by gender, age, and social standing, exist in numerous cultures. Norms function as a structural basis for decision-making, guiding individuals regarding what is permissible or forbidden within their particular social setting.

In addition to influencing career decisions, family dynamics, and education, sociocultural norms influence decision-making in many other domains. Frequently, individuals assimilate these societal standards during their formative years, which influences their perspective on the world and the alternatives they contemplate when reaching conclusions. In addition, when confronted with decisions, individuals may unconsciously or consciously acquiesce to social pressures generated by societal expectations⁵.

Policymakers, educators, and leaders across diverse sectors must comprehend sociocultural norms' impact on decision-making. This underscores the significance of interventions and approaches that are culturally sensitive, acknowledging that a wider cultural milieu influences decisions. Supporting and adhering to these standards can result in decision-making procedures that are more sustainable and effective, in line with the expectations and values of the communities involved.

Fundamental gender stereotypes reinforce bias

Prevalent gender stereotypes function as potent mechanisms that fortify prejudice and sustain inequity in communities. These stereotypes are pervasive societal beliefs concerning the characteristics, conduct, and functions ascribed to males

4. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/343233433_Gender_Roles_in_Inclusive_Blue_Economy

5. https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/3d32ca39-en/1/3/13/index.html?itemId=/content/publication/3d32ca39-en&_csp_=_c53c4487bc06c0c37d4c3c821248d030&itemIGO=oecd&itemContent_Type=book

6. https://books.google.co.ke/books?hl=en&lr=&id=gSl3I2paZ_AC&oi=fnd&pg=PA211&dq=fragmented+recognition+gender+identity&ots=AybPhzjVDl&sig=r8PHUjyqs0W0BwY-nbzqEjxmcl&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q=fragmented%20recognition%20gender%20identity&f=false

7. <https://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/document?repid=rep1&type=pdf&doi=ff7f8675072bfe7f9d48db9001d73c7d-c16a2df8>

8. Ibid

and females. Men are stereotyped as forceful, intellectual, and powerful, while women as caring, emotional, and subservient⁶. In addition to restricting individual expression, these overly simplistic and restrictive categories marginalize and discriminate against those who do not fit these predetermined roles. Prejudice and unequal treatment based on profoundly ingrained gender stereotypes are evident in numerous spheres of life, including professional environments and personal relationships.

Institutions, media, and culture encourage gender stereotypes and prejudice. Media stereotypes, for instance, promote biases and shape social standards. Gender stereotypes may affect recruiting, promotion, and compensation negotiations in the workplace, creating systematic gender inequities. Challenge and deconstruct preconceptions to address these prejudices. By promoting awareness, education, and diverse and positive gender representations, societies can dismantle these stereotypes and create more equitable and inclusive environments where people can express themselves authentically without judgment or discrimination.

Recommendations

Blue economy-related projects must include gender-responsive policies to achieve gender equality. Governments and related agencies should prioritize developing and enforcing marine gender equality policies. This involves creating quotas for women in blue economy decision-making bodies, guaranteeing equal pay for equal labor, and enacting workplace rules to address gender-based discrimination and harassment. Governments should encourage enterprises to adopt gender-sensitive policies and fund training and capacity-building initiatives that enable women to succeed in different blue economy professions.

Additionally, blue economy initiatives should aggressively promote a more diverse workforce to complement policy efforts. Promote mentoring, networking, and training programs to support women's maritime professional involvement and progress. Blue economy companies may foster diversity and inclusiveness in the workplace. This involves offering flexible work arrangements, promoting gender equality, and aggressively recruiting and retaining a diverse workforce.

9. <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.00011/full>

These approaches may help blue economy projects change the industry's culture, breaking down gender barriers and establishing an atmosphere where everyone can flourish and contribute to marine sector sustainability.

Conclusion

The Blue Empowerment project may implement gender equality policy and practice recommendations in the blue economy. Concerning work package 3 (Socio-technical Gaps/Opportunities in Kenyan Coastal Fisheries and Women Empowerment) to promote and execute gender-responsive policies, the project may work with government, marine, and local communities to advocate for and implement gender-responsive policies. This requires policy research, conversations, and persuasion of blue economy decision-makers to pass and implement gender equality laws. These policies may include provisions for reporting and resolving gender-based issues, assurance of equal opportunities, and prevention of workplace discrimination.

Regarding practical initiatives, the Blue Empowerment project may focus on developing and supporting programs that empower women in marine professions. This may include collaborating with educational institutions to offer training and skill development programs customized to women interested in employment in the blue economy. Mentorship initiatives may be implemented to coordinate the provision of guidance and support between aspiring women in the field and seasoned professionals. The initiative may also promote gender-inclusive practices with blue economy companies, including flexible work arrangements and family-friendly policies.

Through work package 2 (Barriers & Solutions/Opportunities for the Equitable Adaptation of Fish Seaweed IMTA), an important aspect of the Blue Empowerment project would be to raise awareness about gender stereotypes and biases within the blue economy. Cultural preconceptions may be changed through focused awareness campaigns, seminars, and educational programs, and an inclusive industry may be created. Through the integration of policy advocacy and practical initiatives, a Blue Empowerment project has the potential to make a substantial and lasting impact on the blue economy by deconstructing gender barriers and advancing sustainable gender equality.

