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POLICY NOTE

UNLOCKING THE POTENTIAL FOR STRENGTHENING THE
ROLE OF WOMEN IN CONSERVATION OF AQUATIC
BIODIVERSITY AND ENVIRONMENTAL MANAGEMENT IN
AFRICA

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CONTEXT

Aquatic resources contribute to income and livelihoods for several people in Africa and elsewhere (Muringai et al., 2021). Estimates show that 61 million people globally engage in the primary sector of capture fisheries and aquaculture alone (FAO, 2021a). However, the potential of these resources for livelihoods improvement is threatened by the high rate of degradation and loss of biodiversity, attributed to overexploitation and unsustainable practices in aquatic environments (Numbere & Maduiké, 2022). Global calls for increasing conservation efforts amidst the use and exploitation of aquatic resources have led to the promotion of the blue economy concept (ECA, 2016; AU-IBAR, 2019; EC, 2021).

Women are central to efforts towards developing blue economy due to their frequent interactions with aquatic environments in their daily economic activities, and also in their efforts to meet the food and nutrition requirements of their households (Aregu et al., 2019). For instance, women play crucial roles as environmental stewards in their communities such as through adoption of practices that reduce degradation of resources and prevent the negative impact of climate change (Akinsemolu, & Olukoya, 2020). However, women face constraints in accessing resources and engaging in decision-making processes due to exclusive gender norms and social relations (Aregu et al., 2019). As

well, women are rarely involved in problem identification and problem solving regarding aquatic biodiversity conservation in Africa. The inequality in opportunities and participation has undermined women's contributions as agents of positive change in aquatic biodiversity conservation and beyond (Armitage et al., 2020).

Women inclusivity is important for the sustainability of outcomes in aquatic biodiversity conservation and environmental management. Developing strategic measures to enhance the involvement of women is more critical in Africa due to the prevalence of exclusive gender norms that undermine the place and role of women in conservation efforts. There is increased recognition among conservation and development community that women inclusivity would help in achieving sustainable outcomes in aquatic biodiversity conservation and environmental management. However, this has not received adequate attention in aquatic conservation projects due to limited efforts in gender mainstreaming in the interventions.

This policy note summarizes findings of the report produced on priority issues and actions necessary for strengthening the role of women in conservation of aquatic biodiversity and environmental management in Africa, under the Aquatic Biodiversity Conservation Project.

1. ISSUES AND CHALLENGES FOR WOMEN INCLUSION IN AQUATIC BIODIVERSITY CONSERVATION AND ENVIRONMENTAL MANAGEMENT

1.1 *Constraints related to gender division of labour*

Gender norms often impose restrictions on women's mobilities, limiting their access to aquatic resources and related livelihood activities. Women roles have also been recognized mainly in processing and marketing activities of aquatic products but not in decision-making and leadership roles (FAO, 2019). Thus, women have little or no access to decision-making processes. Furthermore, gender norms that assign women's productive and reproductive roles to productive work and household duties have contributed to low savings of women to engage in business and entrepreneurship (Rajaratnam et al., 2020).

1.2 *Inequalities in accessing resources and benefits*

Access to aquatic resources has been gendered, and women have lower access to aquatic and environmental resources compared to men in Africa and elsewhere. Women often have low access to productive resources, profitable markets, and high value fish attributed to the lack of adequate gender consideration in the policies and programs

(Fröcklin et al., 2013). In addition, minimal efforts have been done in understanding the gender-specific constraints faced by women fish traders, and gearing support towards enhancing their efficiency of operations (UNCTAD, 2014). As well, the rights, access, and control over resources have been ignored (WWF, 2012; Randrianantoandro et al., 2022).

Women's limited access to the resources could emanate from social norms that influence consumption patterns and male dominance in decision-making processes over aquatic resources (e.g. fish harvests), productive assets and income (FAO, 2019). The rights of women in accessing aquatic resources such as seagrass meadows and wetlands often reveal insecurity (UNEP, 2020). Such constraints in turn contributed to women's low access to aquatic resources (Baker-Médard, 2017). Gender norms coupled with women's workload also negatively influence women's access to resources, technology, and information on aquatic biodiversity conservation (Randrianantoandro et al., 2022).

Gender discrimination in accessing resources could have limited the opportunities to engage women in developing gender-responsive technologies and innovations for reducing strategies for post-harvest losses and wastages of aquatic products, among others (Cole et al., 2018; Randrianantoandro et al., 2022). It has been observed that engaging community in conservation initiatives may not necessarily

mean engagement and representation of diverse interests and groups (Baker-Médard, 2017). Besides, the fact that women might not benefit from conservation calls for a more meaningful engagement of women in aquatic ecosystem and environmental conservation (James et al., 2021).

1.3 Participation in decision making processes

Gender norms often define what men and women should do, and contribute to underrepresentation of women in decision making processes (Baker-Médard, 2017). Gender equality and women's empowerment have been central to building resilience due to the relevance of women's traditional and local ecological knowledge in management strategies (UNEP, 2020). Women's understanding of the environment and their role as custodians of traditional knowledge could have relevance in co-creation of resilience and adaptation strategies in aquatic biodiversity conservation and environmental management (FAO & ARC, 2021). Women interact with the environment more than men, implying the importance of consideration of women's indigenous knowledge and their perspectives in the valuing of resources in conservation initiatives.

1.4 Women's vulnerability to shocks and gender-based violence

Women have been disproportionately vulnerable to environmental risks and disasters and gender-based violence amid degradation of aquatic and environmental resources (IFRC & UNICEF, 2021; UN Women, 2021a). For instance, women and girls have increased vulnerability to gender-based violence in the fisheries sector attributed to structural constraints and harmful social norms (Siles et al., 2019). Furthermore, infrastructure development in aquatic ecosystems in Africa revealed little gender consideration. This may aggravate gender inequality and threaten the livelihoods of women.

2. OPPORTUNITIES FOR WOMEN INCLUSION IN AQUATIC BIODIVERSITY CONSERVATION AND ENVIRONMENTAL MANAGEMENT

2.1 *Transforming gender norms and sustaining women's livelihoods*

Diverse economic opportunities exist for enhancing the livelihoods of women in aquatic ecosystems. Women interact with aquatic resources for their income and livelihoods in their daily lives. They could have a crucial role in exploring solutions as well as transferring good practices between generations. Thus, understanding gender norms and women's roles at different levels could be a stepping stone for stimulating collective actions towards sustainable blue economy in Africa. Inclusive decision-making processes, and active participation of women and marginalized groups in decision-making processes coupled with capacity development at all levels has relevance for transforming gender norms in aquatic biodiversity conservation and environmental management.

2.2 *Increasing women's access to aquatic and environmental resources*

Opportunities exist in promoting equitable access to resources among men and women, creating an enabling environment for women engagement and entrepreneurship

in developing strategies, technologies, and innovations supporting aquatic ecosystem conservation. Promotion of inclusive and human-rights approaches that put gender equality at the centre would help in sustaining the outcomes of aquatic conservation and environmental management.

2.3 *Women inclusion in building resilience in aquatic biodiversity conservation and environmental management*

There is the need for adoption of intersectional approaches in policies and practices especially at local level for building on relevant gender-specific knowledge. Gender-specific knowledge could be associated with one's frequent interactions with resources and engagement in socio-cultural activities (Pearson et al., 2019; Nyangoko et al., 2020). Opportunities exist in learning the experiences of women in aquatic biodiversity conservation, and in promoting inclusiveness in resilience building. There is increased realization of the importance of building resilience to risks and addressing underlying vulnerabilities as a unifying goal for gender, climate change, disaster management, and resilient development practitioners at all levels (UN Women, 2021a, b).

2.4 *Building women’s technical, managerial, and leadership capacities in aquatic biodiversity conservation*

Engaging women in collective action such as group formation and mobilizing social capital towards common goals in aquatic conservation and environmental management helps for increasing women’s inclusivity. To name a few, engagement in group activities helps women share information and exchange knowledge, and also increases their access to credits, trainings, and in strengthening their overall capacities. These could help women to make their voices heard and enhance their negotiating power and motivate women towards entrepreneurship and networking (Setini et al, 2020). Opportunities exist in empowering women with active engagement in decision-making and leadership roles in aquatic biodiversity conservation and environmental management. Efforts geared towards building women’s leadership and financial management capacities could also play central role in enhancing women’s engagement in aquatic biodiversity conservation and environmental management. Increased attention to reducing the constraining gender norms, gendered roles and relations that limit women’s access technical, managerial, and leadership capacities helps in increasing women’s inclusivity.

3. PRIORITY AREAS AND ACTION POINTS FOR WOMEN INCLUSION IN AQUATIC BIODIVERSITY CONSERVATION AND ENVIRONMENTAL MANAGEMENT

3.1 *Capacity development and empowerment*

This involves measures to strengthen the equal and equitable rights of women in aquatic biodiversity conservation and environmental management, and promote the use of rights-based approaches in strengthening the capacity of women in undertaking their responsibilities and rights over aquatic and environmental resources. This can be achieved through:

- **Human capacity development** - Increase investment in strengthening women’s knowledge and skills in aquatic biodiversity conservation and environmental management such as technical, managerial, financial, leadership, conflict management and resolution, strategic planning, and innovation and technology for supporting women’s inclusion in conservation of aquatic biodiversity and environmental management.
- **Promoting women’s equal participation** - Increase women’s participation in electoral processes to enable them to have the power to influence decisions on access to resources – access to finance,

- group formation, collective action, changing constraining gender norms and access to inputs for narrowing the gender inequalities in accessing opportunities, resources and benefits in aquatic value chains.
- **Supporting the realization of rights -** based approaches – Support programs that consider women’s rights as human rights, enable women’s equal participation, and recognize women as key actors in aquatic biodiversity conservation and environmental management, and ensuring processes and outcomes have women’s ownership.
 - **Capacity building in gender mainstreaming among institutions** - Strengthen the knowledge and skills in gender mainstreaming in aquatic biodiversity conservation and environmental management among: government institutions, academia and research institutions, private sector, community and social group levels for building capacities to implement gender mainstreaming strategies.
 - Promotion of gender-responsive communication strategies - Employing the use of mass media to engage different members of the society including men, women, school children and youth on aquatic conservation and environmental management related issues taking into consideration cultural settings. Identifying community champions/ influencers to facilitate the engagement of the public has proven effective in community engagement approaches.
 - Establishing a gender working group on aquatic biodiversity conservation and environmental management to enhance: creation of databases and platform for data sharing; monitoring and evaluation of gender mainstreaming; and informing policies at different levels.
 - Developing instruments for involvement of private sector in supporting gender inclusivity in aquatic biodiversity conservation and environmental management.
 - Establishing mechanisms for stakeholder and consultative engagements for increased implementation and ownership of policy measures – Knowledge/experience sharing).

3.2 *Communication and stakeholder engagement*

Refers to actions to build engagement on gender equality and women’s empowerment in aquatic biodiversity conservation and environmental management. Actions to be undertaken include:

3.3 *Policy reform*

To ensure policies and programs take gender equality and women’s empowerment issues into consideration. A starting point for policy reform could focus on:

- Examining the policy context at National level and synthesizing with the policy context at Regional level, considering the specific contexts of each Region.
- Establishing Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant and Time-Bound (SMART) indicators for domesticating gender-responsive international protocols/policies in national laws and develop a monitoring and evaluation program for following up policy implementation at the national level.
- Strengthening of institutions and allocation of resources for policy adaptation and implementation.

3.4 *Research and innovation*

To strengthen the active participation of women in research and innovation systems in aquatic biodiversity conservation and environmental management. Measures to achieve this include:

- Adopting gender-responsive research and innovation approaches – Support timely and efficient data collection of the number of women and their local traditional knowledge and practices in the aquatic biodiversity conservation and environmental management, and strengthen women’s roles and values, opportunities, and challenges.
- Supporting women’s participation in technical research and innovation by advocating to be part of all-inclusive research and innovation processes in aquatic biodiversity conservation and environmental management.
- Incentivising women’s activities by providing specialized funding opportunities on gender research, and providing entrepreneurship opportunities for women.
- Advocating for women knowledge and experiences sharing through organizing workshops, exhibitions, talks shows, trade fairs, various country visits, websites.
- Enhancing the development of value additional innovative technologies to reduce post-harvest losses and increase income for women.
- Promoting environmental conservation programs, including “Waste for wealth” as an alternative source of livelihood for the women in the fishing communities.
- Providing organisation and support – social capital development ; creation of decent jobs that help women excel in their career; supporting women to access credits and loans; improving women participation in mobile or agent banking; advocating for improved employment conditions such as child care centers at work and other mother benefits at work; supporting capacity development and mentorship programs that enable women to break the barriers to career development.

4. GUIDELINES FOR WOMEN INCLUSIVITY IN AQUATIC BIODIVERSITY CONSERVATION AND ENVIRONMENTAL MANAGEMENT

The adoption of a gender-responsive approach in aquatic ecosystem conservation and environmental management will enhance the sustenance of ecological objectives in aquatic biodiversity conservation and environmental management outcomes. The following tenets will facilitate women inclusivity in aquatic biodiversity conservation and environmental management:

a. Policy and institutional framework

- Invest in inclusive policy making by applying gender lens and tools for assessing how gender issues are framed in the documents, and how women have been affected by the policies and programs in aquatic biodiversity conservation and environmental management.
- Strengthen the role of women in value addition and competitiveness and reduce women's barriers to excel in their activities through organisation and support (social capital development, child care facilities).
- Dedicate budget for gender-related work.
- Promote women leadership in aquatic biodiversity conservation and

environmental management.

- Improve the flexibility of working conditions for encouraging women taking up leadership roles in ministries relevant for aquatic biodiversity conservation and environmental management.

b. Communication and information sharing

- Develop awareness and gender-related skills. This includes building women's technical, managerial and leadership capacities, investing in gender awareness among key actors in aquatic biodiversity conservation and environmental management, and promoting gender-specific knowledge for building climate resilience in aquatic ecosystems.

c. Data and capacity development

- Adopt intersectional approaches that capture key gender dimensions across initiatives. This can be achieved by paying attention to gender division of labor for targeting women effectively, promoting women's increased access to resources and benefits, empowering women in decision-making and controlling of resources, income and assets, and critically examining the local structures (formal and informal) for supporting gender equality in aquatic biodiversity conservation and environmental management.

- Promote transformative approaches for addressing gender norms constraining women's access to resources and achieve gender transformation in the long term.
- Promote male engagement and community engagement approaches for identifying and addressing the underlying causes of gender inequality.

d. Monitoring and Evaluation

- Monitor gender issues across the initiatives. This would help to capture lessons and make required changes in the initiatives.

5. CONCLUSION

Challenges for enhancing women inclusivity in aquatic biodiversity conservation and environmental management include but are not limited to: lack of visibility of women's contribution to conservation activities, limited capacity and representation of women in decision-making processes, and lack of adequate gender expertise in the team. Thus, efforts should focus on reducing the constraining gender norms, and understanding gendered roles and relations that limit women's access to technical, managerial, and leadership capacities.

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