

Women's Narratives on Livelihoods from the Ocean

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Abstract

This article reflects on the meanings emanating from women's narratives about their experiences of living with the sea to contribute to the debates on 'localizing' the Blue Economy (BE) in Tanzania. Employing a feminist political ecology analysis, it explores how women's voices and interests are heard in the BE agenda, and the extent to which this agenda is sensitive to their circumstances. The study employed a qualitative approach to generate information from male and female members in coastal villages in Bagamoyo, and in Unguja and Pemba. The findings suggest that despite wide knowledge on women's engagement in ocean-based livelihood activities, BE priorities do not give due attention to their circumstances and realities as they engage with the sea. There are also issues about social inclusion and equity as articulated by BE provisions and decisions in the country. It is contended that gender-based power relations at different levels often influence decisions on coastal and marine resource access. Consequently, these decisions marginalize women from attaining meaningful benefit from marine resources.

Keywords: *Blue Economy, women's narratives, feminist political ecology, coastal communities, livelihoods*

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1. Introduction and Background

Several debates on the intentions of the Blue Economy (BE) and its approaches to ocean governance have focused on how it may be able to accommodate the needs and expectations of local communities (Harbinger et al., 2023; Gustavson et al., 2021). There has been growing concern on how such a macro-economic oriented approach will be able to distribute its potential benefits equitably, and not at the expense of the rights and livelihoods of the men and women who are reliant on fisheries (Bennett et al., 2022; Cohen et al., 2019). Inadequate acknowledgement of the potentials and situations of women engaged in coastal fisheries that is evident in some BE interventions indicates a further aspect of the fisheries that demands attention within BE-related approaches (FAO, 2023).

Despite the fact that there has been considerable exposure on women's engagements with the sea, such as women thriving in aquaculture-related activities (RGZ, 2022), in fish processing and handling fish trades (FAO, 2023), and some milestones realized in women's participation in decision-making over coastal and marine resource use (Galappathi et al., 2022), their experiences vary significantly (FAO, 2016).

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In some fisheries, women may be present in significant numbers but dominate in the least paying positions in the value-chains, while their effective contribution to management is often engulfed by gendered-influenced biases (URT, 2015; Benett et al., 2019; FAO, 2023). In other contexts, women have fared worse than men when their dominant production systems change due to socioeconomic, environmental or political factors (Bradford & Katikiro, 2019). For example, several studies have shown how environmental changes leading to resource depletion have had variable impacts and challenges by gender, with women having lesser response options in comparison to men (Khan et al., 2018; Bennet et al., 2019; Knott et al., 2024). Women's heightened vulnerability to these factors is further intensified by gender-based social dynamics. Their social positioning often leave them under-resourced, relying on traditional rights of access to nearby coastal and marine resources for their livelihoods. It is at this juncture that questions on women's inclusion, equity, and justice become key considerations in decisions about BE-related processes (Knott et al., 2024). This article discusses women's inclusion in the BE by applying a feminist political ecology (FPE) analysis, which highlights ways in which the approach could become a resource management strategy that acknowledges and values the lived experiences of both women and men who rely on it for their livelihoods (Bennet et al., 2019; FAO, 2023; Knott et al., 2024).

The BE agenda, currently a popular approach to sustainable use and development of water bodies and their resources, has been customized by policies of the United Republic of Tanzania (URT) and the Revolutionary Government of Zanzibar (RGoZ) to reflect the desire to capitalize on the economic advantages that it is envisaged to bring. The URT government launched its BE strategy in 2024, while the Zanzibar government developed its BE policy in 2022.

Although the development of these policies reflects some form of independent jurisdictions on the governance of water bodies, they both recognize similar strategic pillars of economic and social development in the country to be addressed by the BE process. These mainly include fisheries, tourism, maritime transport and infrastructure, and extractive and energy industries (RGZ, 2022; URT, 2024). Equally so, both policies recognize the need to empower local communities, including women, and have advanced strategies to enable their beneficial participation in the governance of BE activities (RGZ, 2022; URT, 2024). Furthermore, the potentials of women in marine resource management is recognized, and hence the necessity to not only advance gender equality in related opportunities, but also in the governance and handling of marine and maritime-related BE activities.

A key feature of these BE policies is the attention given to the development of the sectors directly relevant to the livelihoods of fishing communities; in this case, coastal communities. These include small-scale fishing, aquaculture, and coastal tourism. This concern of the BE policies is presumably cognizant of the evident

social and economic value that BE activities have for people's livelihoods at varying scales (Cisneros-Montemayor et al., 2019; Gerhardinger et al., 2023; Mwanyoka et al., 2025).

However, although the development of these and other BE sectors has been guided by specific policies, laws and strategies, they are still confronted by several issues. These include the lack of an inclusive framework that would coordinate the several economic sectors/investments that are reflective of the potentials of the BE; the lack of a collaborative plan for the use of water resources; and—also importantly—the lack of adequate research and innovation in the exploitation of BE resources: all of which have a bearing on the sustainable management of these resources by communities and their livelihoods (URT, 2024). Equally important is how these issues impact on the livelihoods of coastal communities, and specifically on the experiences and lives of coastal women. Inadequate research on the specific circumstances that women face in coastal and marine environments has limited the understanding, and hence the appreciation, on how the BE influences their ability to benefit meaningfully from resources, or to be fully included in decision-making related to blue economy (BE) development interventions.

This paper addresses the existing gap in studies related to the advancement of BE policies, and specifically focuses on women and their ocean-based livelihoods. Hence, we align with the advocacy by several researchers that call for an inclusive research agenda on the BE that examines the concerns of the marginalization or exclusion of women in the implementation of its strategic interventions in coastal communities (Bennett et al., 2016, Cisneros-Montemayor et al., 2019). We also address the need for coastal communities to strengthen their positions in BE processes by being vigilant of gender biases (Evans et al., 2023).

However, we recognize that to realize this, strategies that identify potential opportunities for women's inclusion need to be made accessible to community members; and that the risks, barriers, and challenges that might hinder community members from exploiting and benefitting from BE resources are addressed. We also ponder how concerns about gender equity, power, and justice in coastal governance and management can be addressed (Bennett et al., 2016; Bradford & Katikiro, 2019) in the light of the BE agenda.

Thus, this study sought to examine how marginalization or exclusion is conceptualized by coastal community members. We do this by capturing the voices of different population groups, particularly women who live their lives dependent on coastal resources. Using the FPE approach it becomes possible to deeply interrogate and expose hidden gender biases in policy processes. The assumption here is that the risk of marginalization of local people's voices, including women, is associated with their lower positions in the policy dialogue regarding coastal and marine resources management, as a number of studies have indicated (Karakara & Dasmani, 2022; Dewan, 2023; Mwaipopo & Ndaluka, 2023). Therefore,

understanding how women's voices are visible in the BE agenda and policies is imperative for sustainable and gender-sensitive ocean resource governance and management (Kotze & Muller, 2024).

Methodologically, the main issues that the study pursued were: How do we understand women's location within the BE agenda in Tanzania; and how do women locate themselves within the decisions of harnessing the BE given their vast experience of living with the ocean and its resources. Therefore, as further discussed, the FPE perspective allowed us to interrogate these issues from a feminist perspective; and how approaches such as the BE could harbour within them possibilities of social exclusion or inclusion with gender connotations. The article uses coastal women's narratives to reflect on how they themselves question the meaning of the BE agenda in relation to their lives; and how, in turn, the BE management approaches employed generate agentic responses to livelihood opportunities even amidst challenges.

2. Theoretical Considerations: A Feminist Political Ecology Lens

This article embraced the FPE perspective to inform its analysis of women's experience with the BE agenda. The FPE is a justice-charged analytical perspective that aims to counter inequalities in environmental management from multiple angles, namely gender and other forms of difference. In this case, the FPE perspective was used because of its focus in promoting the opportunities and abilities of women to challenge dominating and discriminative tendencies on ecological processes and natural resource use and decision making, such as in BE-related interventions (Sundberg, 2015). According to Elmhirst (2015), the FPE gives space to marginalized voices to be acknowledged in dominant discourses or processes. It combines key arguments from feminist theories and political ecology to establish an analytical framework that interrogates how gendered power dynamics are configured within economic processes, in this case, marine/water resource use and management (Rocheleau et al., 1995; Braun, 2009).

Given that natural resource management processes entail decision-making over economic aspects, the FPE offers a critical eye on these processes; addressing the dynamics resulting from the interface of political, environmental and economic aspects to a meaningful resource management framework occurring in a particular discursive context. The FPE's contention that environmental resources are contested in multiple ways, and by multiple factors, allows us to interrogate the BE approach on environmental resources more critically (Sundberg, 2015; Harcourt, 2022). This is because, the FPE approach examines how inequalities over resource management are influenced by gender differences and other forms of power. The FPE also contends that political institutions and social structures blindly embrace cultural descriptions on gender, and hence perpetuate and maintain gender-based inequalities in people's uses and access to natural resources. In addition, the FPE suggests that dominant narratives related to development, in this case the BE approach, should be questioned and interrogated on how they accommodate or ignore gender-based

experiences and realities since, often, women's lived experiences are relegated as invisible (Sundberg, 2015). The FPE is thus better placed to explain how marginalization intersects with questions of social justice, and which have had different impacts to men and women (Braun, 2009). This is manifested at different levels. Firstly, at the level of conflicts that are exemplified by: (i) cultural-based norms and values that bias the capacities of certain individuals against others (Rocheleau et al., 1995); and (ii) interfering with equity in engaging and benefiting from resources. Gender is a key variable influencing such contestations (Sundberg, 2015).

At another level, are the biases inherent in environmental-related discourses, in this case, the BE agenda. It thus becomes imperative to examine the sources of knowledge that inform this agenda. The FPE approach acknowledges that there are multiple ways of 'knowing', which in our case, is to recognise that there are alternative explanations to the dominant thoughts about the BE (Harcourt, 2020). To uncover who has been marginalised in these discourses, the FPE approach questions these dominant processes in often subtle—and sometimes not so subtle—ways to uncover issues about justice and inequality. Local people's narratives, attained through a participatory process, reflect the subtle ways that people, who are otherwise marginalised, give voice to dominant discourses about their resources and to their concerns.

Hence, the FPE perspective forwards a powerful opportunity to interrogate the claim of BE policies to pursue social equity and sustainability from a local people's perspective, in this case women's. The FPE advances the commitment of a critical theory that seeks to examine social and political processes beyond appearances: what is usually known as beyond the surface explanations. In this case, any initiative or policy with keywords of social inclusion, social justice, gender mainstreaming, empowerment or equity should be subjected to scrutiny. For example, the FPE approach in this regard will question how the BE strategy has accommodated aspects regarding local uses and access to resources, and would also address how traditional knowledge on resource management—which are gendered and known to limit or avail women's benefits from these resources—have been addressed (Sundberg, 2015; Elias et al., 2021).

Some studies have seen the omission of local people's experiences as a challenge because of the fact that the BE approach is informed by large-scale resource extraction with a presumed caveat of 'sustainable use' (Karakara & Dasmani, 2022). In this case it becomes quite challenging for the process to avoid the principles of capitalism, which include privatization and commodification for the accumulation of profit (Gerhardinger et al., 2023). The risk that privatization and commodification could be pursued at the expense of equity and inclusivity—in this case, gender sensitivity and inclusion—is thus, high (Knott et al., 2024; Khan et al., 2018). Several related questions thus arise concerning such orientations that need conviction. One of these questions is about how social benefits and equity concerns are to be realised; and how outcomes—planned or not—would be assessed within the BE approaches (Cisneros-Montemayor et al., 2023).

Another issue relates to FPE's acknowledgment of the capacities of women in natural resource uses and management as equal 'knowers' because of their everyday experiences with these resources as they navigate their life circumstances. In this respect, the theory promotes the realization that women's knowledge and potentials in resource management need to be acknowledged; and that the extent to which such knowledge sharing across multiple levels is pursued.

Finally, the FPE approach contends that women have agency, and also, the oftentimes silent struggles advanced by women for their survival and that of their households are all acts of resilience, which can be seen in their actions or communications about their rights (Cohen et al., 2019). Therefore, it is necessary to examine BE processes recognize and address these key concerns, and how they can promote equity—or in some cases generate vulnerability—drawing on the lived experiences of men and women who depend on the marine environment (Haris, 2015). The lived experiences of people in their everyday life, as they interact with other people and with the environment or natural resources, create platforms where they not only generate knowledge on the environment, but where they can also decipher the contestations within which their environmental truths can be realised. Interactions with the environment also makes it possible for individuals to better understand colonial or exploitative aspects, traditional and past mentalities on decisions over natural resource management and use, and to challenge them.

Given the several reservations of the BE policy on issues such as rights to resources for local producers, including small-scale fishers and seaweed farmers (Mwanyoka et al., 2025), the principles of the FPE approach on social justice, gender equality and women's agency can thus effectively be used to analyse wide advocacy on its interventions. In this regard, the BE's ability to meaningfully sustain and uplift the economic situations of women and other local producers in a context of cultural and social sensitivities becomes crucial, which the FPE approach rightfully addresses.

3. Methodology and Approach

This study was conducted under the aegis of the University of Dar es Salaam Research Policy and Operational Procedures (UDSM, 2024). In line with provisions of the UDSM's research protocol, the study considered all applicable ethical issues, including obtaining permission from the relevant authorities. The study also sought informed consent from the interlocutors, who were informed of their freedom to withdraw from the interview at any point they felt like doing so.

This study adopted a phenomenological qualitative research approach in which women's narratives about their historical accounts and experiences were used to illustrate and reflect on their relationship with the sea, and the envisaged potentials of the BE strategies to their lives. The phenomenological approach was used because of its strength in getting a deeper understanding of how people

express their lived experiences, and construct meaning of their world through their interactions, in this case, with marine resources. Engaging with interlocutors through their narratives and conversations about their experiences and perceptions is a qualitative technique that enriches the principles of phenomenology, which emphasize examining phenomena as they are experienced by people. Hence, through the participants' narratives, the study pursued to learn how people were communicating about BE interventions, what they experienced, how it was experienced, and what messages they drew regarding their livelihood situations.

The study was conducted in three coastal communities of Bagamoyo District in Mainland Tanzania (Dunda, Kondo, and Mlingotini), two communities of Unguja, Zanzibar (Fungurefu and Kiombamvua), and one community, Wesha, in Pemba island.

The collection of data involved a documentary review, participant observation, and interviews conducted between October, 2023 and May, 2024. The study participants included women and men, marine and coastal resource users, traders, seaweed producers, fisheries officials, and officials of fishery landing sites (BMU and SFC leaders). These participants were purposely selected based on their lived experiences in the coastal communities. Observation also involved taking photos. All the photos used in this article and those stored for recording were taken with the consent of the interlocutors.

Employing a qualitative methodology, this study pursued the following key issues: (i) How coastal women use the sea, and how do they, through such engagements, see the BE's impact on their continued rights to coastal and marine resources; (ii) How have they experienced changes in their uses of the sea, and how are such changes evaluated; (iii) What contestations have happened through such engagements, and how do they envisage the impact of the BE in their lives; and how—through such struggles—do women express agency and resilience; and (iv) what can be incorporated in the BE strategy to reflect women's rights.

The recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim by three research assistants. To ensure the dependability of the data, the authors listened to the recorded voices and compared them with the transcribed texts. A thematic analysis was adopted by deducting and construing emerging main themes and sub-themes.

4. Findings and Discussions

In this section, we present findings generated from interviews with women and men in Bagamoyo and Zanzibar. We start with how women access and engage with the sea and coastal spaces; before examining the evolution of traditions and self-employment activities in these places. We end with an examination of contemporary uses of the sea, and the ensuing competition and contestations related to women's uses of coastal resources.

4.1 Access to and Engagement with the Sea and Coastal Spaces

Among the most immediate issues that local coastal women communicated about their connection with the sea was about their use of the sea, and how through such uses they could self-actualize themselves and their households. During this study we were able to learn from coastal women's narratives on how they experience the ocean as a multi-faceted and evolving platform of opportunity, but also of limitations; and at the same time as a source of power and contestations throughout their lifetimes. According to them, life with the sea was connected with everyday activities of managing the home and the coastal and marine resources in the form of a series of dualities, namely (Kiswahili in *italics*): exploitation and conservation (*kuvuna na kuhifadhi*); development and change (*maendeleo na mabadiliko*); and contestations and accommodation (*ushindani na maridhiano*). To them, such interaction was mediated by coastal and marine resource exploitation opportunities (as they emerge).

In this context, women explained how they have for a long time interacted with the intertidal zone and the beach area as they conduct fishing and gleaning, or collecting octopus; activities that have traditionally been the preserve of women. It was observed that these areas are the only 'spaces' that have allowed coastal women, irrespective of age or socio-economic circumstances, to be resilient in maintaining ownership of the sea in the midst of changing political, social and environmental processes. Very few men—especially elderly men who could not go fishing in vessels—were engaged in the collection of sea snails (*suka/simbi*).

Among the factors that facilitated access to such spaces were the traditional interpretations of people's rights to the sea. Women in Mlingotini explained that their traditional rights to shallow waters of the intertidal zone was acknowledged, by all coastal communities along the coast of Bagamoyo district, as an area that women could use without interference to sustain themselves and their families. This was because women did not venture in deep waters, not only because of the lack of resources, but also because of cultural prohibitions. Fishermen using vessels or traditional traps (*madema, wando*) identified these 'boundaries' of operation; and actually acknowledged their wrongdoing when they violated such women's spaces in the course of fishing. This was narrated in the consultations with community members at Kondo village in Bagamoyo on 22/08/2023.

Hence, narratives from the women participants in Bagamoyo, Unguja, and Pemba pointed out that access to the sea and sea resources was highly gendered. The collections of *simbi* in Bagamoyo, and *pweza* in Unguja (Kiombamvua), were regarded as belonging to the spheres of women's activities. The expertise of collecting these resources was transmitted from one generation to another. Women interlocutors declared that they were taught the skills by their mothers, grandmothers, and/or elderly women in the community as they operated together daily in the sea; and in preparing sea snails for meals or trade. An elderly woman from Kondo village, Bagamoyo, explained how she had been collecting sea snails

for most of her adult life for food and household income; and how through such activity she was able to teach her daughters and younger siblings' self-reliance in income earning:

Collecting simbi each morning when the spring tides ebb (bamvua) is a tedious job that demands patience and endurance. But it is a reliable venture because the work simply needs perseverance under the sun and open winds of the ocean. We do not need material capital to gain entry. The intertidal area and beaches have been free entry spaces that we have utilized. We sometimes wake up before 6:00 am, depending on the seasons, and may work up to 8:00 am. Each one of us then sorts and de-shells the sea snails in a shaded spot alongside the beach; or some of us carry them home for this process. We then put some aside for home consumption, and some for sale. Self-employment in suka collection has thus offered a dependable livelihood for many women who cannot engage in other activities that demand permits, licences, or capital resources (Female gleaner, Kondo, 10/10/2023).

Similar views were given by women in Kiombamvua, Unguja, who had not only maintained their work of collecting *suka/simbi*, but have also organized themselves into a *simbi*-collectors' group with common interests on the sea and beach. Through the organization, these women—with a few men—asserted their 'occupation' of the intertidal area alongside Kiombamvua, which to them was a platform for demanding their continued use of the space despite a growing interest along the coastal space for tourism (Women gleaners, Kiombamvua, 2/3/2024).



Photo 1: Women Collecting *simbi* in the Bagamoyo Coast

Source: Authors, 2022.

However, what we observed was that the BE policies do not acknowledge gleaning or foot fishing adequately, seemingly ignoring traditional activities as priorities for local coastal communities to be considered in the BE agenda for Mainland Tanzania and Zanzibar. The risk here is that such negligence may lead to a gradual erosion of the value of gleaning at the expense of activities commanding more global attention, such as finfish fishing or tourism.

Inadequate appreciation of these traditional production systems raise the danger of women's exclusion from traditional tenure rights over coastal and marine resources that they have enjoyed for a long time. Such situations also put women at the risk of economic deprivation if BE interventions overrule community uses of the marine areas.

4.2 Traditional Activities and the Significance of Self-employment

One of the most gratifying experiences of traditional uses of the sea, such as gleaning, was women's appreciation of self-employment, where they have been able to support their own consumption needs and income by petty selling of their wares without having to be subjected to rigid market conditions. Mama Z, a seasoned gleaner and petty trader at Kondo village explained, "*.. gleaning gave us independence... each woman planned, executed, and managed her business from the ocean to the home or the market (Consultations, Mama Z, 10/10/2023).*

Being relatively easy, women and some older men worked along the intertidal zone in groups, sometimes with their young children, to collect *simbi* or *kome*. The assurance of getting a meal from the sea was also evident in how they referred to the 'open-entry' working space that they could access daily, "*... but you have to work to get a meal*" (Kondo, 10/10/2023).

Furthermore, an elderly fisherman jokingly referred to the adage '*mgaagaa na upwa hali wali mkavu*' (lit: s/he who wanders along the shore never eats rice without relish) (Fisher, Dunda, 25/10/2023). He was referring to how relatively easy it was even for newcomers (*wakuja*) to enter, work and benefit from the intertidal area of the sea, albeit with certain conditions to enable their use. These were said to be relatively easy conditions that some newcomers were subjected to, such as having to be introduced into the gleaning activity by friends who were local people, and from whom they also learned how to trade with the produce. The same pattern was said to happen in traditional octopus catching in nearby reefs, which, as was the case with *simbi* collection, did not demand costly equipment: one simply needed a stick for picking (*kuchokoa*) octopus. The activity was self-planned and self-sustaining, and conveniently interlinked with household maintenance activities.

Ideas about self-employment were, however, contested when the women spoke about the changing patterns of the use of the sea. The study participants explained that modern methods of ocean resource extraction have reduced opportunities for self-employment. Unlike before, when people had greater freedom to engage in these activities, they now face dependence on others, and increased competition among different users of the sea.

4.3 Contemporary Uses of the Sea: Employment and Servitude

During the period of this study, it was observed that new ways of benefiting from the sea—such as through aquaculture, and particularly the farming of seaweed, sea cucumbers, or crab culture—had become popular sea-based livelihood activities

engaging both coastal men and women. Seaweed production in particular, which was introduced in the late 1990s, had become a prominent venture among coastal women.

The introduction of seaweed production was said to have proceeded with considerable local mobilization, capacity building and organization by government extension workers, product companies, and even academics and researchers (Swahili Ocean Worlds Workshop 2, Bagamoyo, 29 July 2023). The communities of Weshu (Pemba), and Mlingotini (Bagamoyo), which participated in this study, had quite well-established seaweed production groups that were dominated by women producers; and their activities were facilitated by local fisheries authorities.

Seaweed farming engaged women across the several nodes of its value chain, and it was clear that the activity had gathered momentum in the coastal community livelihoods, supplementing other sources of livelihood such as gleaning, fishing or agriculture. In the case of Zanzibar, the prominence of seaweed production was evident in BE policy initiatives, owing to its potential in employing and sustaining the livelihoods of many women and men on the islands. The BE policy of the RGoZ notes that 80% of all seaweed farmers on the island are women, the bulk being in Pemba (RGoZ, 2022). Narrating the significance of seaweed production, a farmer at Mlingotini, Bagamoyo, said:

Seaweed farming has been a reliable source of income for many women, albeit in small amounts, because currently there are few opportunities for processing it or for value addition, hence most of us sell unprocessed seaweed whose price is low; and the market is controlled by a few companies. However, since when we were trained on value addition, we have begun making bathing soap and skin jelly from seaweed, instead of selling it unprocessed. Yet, again, the market for locally processed products from seaweed is not reliable (Farmer, Mlingotini, 22/10/2023).

Seaweed production has also been a ‘gender-game-changer’ for some coastal communities, who had for long been limited with viable opportunities for women to make a reasonable income. The secretary of the seaweed producers’ organization of Mlingotini, Bagamoyo, where seaweed production is a predominantly a women’s venture—explained that seaweed has given some households a reason to acknowledge the value of women’s work and contribution to household sustenance that had been otherwise relegated as inferior. She said:

Seaweed has become a reliable platform for women to engage profitably with the ocean, and it is an activity that even our partners find acceptable because, although it is demanding in terms of labour and time, the proceeds can be significant albeit in small amounts. However, it has its sacrifices. Women are not free producers, they become employed to the crop... it has a fixed market that one has to subscribe to, and because we produce in groups, we have to participate in the activities of planting, weeding, and harvesting. These groups are binding. (Seaweed farmer, Mlingotini, 15/02/2024).

Hence, to the women, the new ways of using ocean resources come at a price, even if they are seen as more economically beneficial than the traditional marine

livelihood activities. In addition—and in the case of seaweed production in particular—the activity demanded engagement in a business-like fashion that required local processing for value addition to be carried out in advanced contexts. We observed this being conducted at variable scales across our study communities. Aquaculture activities, therefore, which although have earned significant policy attention focusing on women in the country, were observed to bind its producers to purchaser-related contracts across its value chain that do not offer much freedom in decision-making in its engagement.

In some communities, seaweed farmers produce low-cost products like soap, body oil, and seaweed flour; the latter being known for its health benefits. However, limited local markets force them to seek buyers in nearby towns. For instance, the Chairperson of Msichoke Seaweed of Mlingotini made weekly trips to Bagamoyo town to sell soap and body jelly that was produced by the group members. Yet, with low production capacity, earnings remain insufficient to sustain members without additional income sources. Dogeje et al. (2025) similarly contended that the economic advantages realised through seaweed farming were minimal due to the lack of adequate government support to facilitate other aspects of its value-chain.

This was also the case in Pemba's sales of seaweed. Our interlocutors explained that most producers have to sell their harvest directly to the few seaweed companies that supply them with production inputs, an arrangement that has facilitated farmers' production for some time. We learned that increasing productivity in terms of the scale for small-holder seaweed farmer, irrespective of the marketing challenges for both raw and/or processed seaweed, was however still found to be a top priority among the local producers and local fisheries officials.

Because of its current prominence in coastal livelihoods, the Zanzibari government recently invested in the construction of a seaweed processing factory in Pemba (RGoZ, 2022). This decision was in response to the need to support producers with a ready market and, with a better price, to promote seaweed production further. Our interlocutors expressed how hopeful they were in the establishment of this factory since their obligatory relationships with existing private seaweed marketing companies compelled them to succumb to quite low prices. However, although this move was seen as a positive initiative reflecting BE processes, it still positioned coastal people differently from the freedom of engagement with the sea that they had been used to; forcing them to gradually operate within the dictates of a wider economy rather than their own.

Another livelihood activity that engaged coastal women to a great extent was engagement in anchovy (*dagaa*) fisheries business, where they mostly participated in the processing and trading of dried anchovies. The dynamics of the local anchovy fisheries value chain illustrated how established the industry was. It operated with high levels of coordination from the local fishers and processors, to local and international buyers along its value chain. This fisheries business, which

was prominent in both Pemba and Zanzibar study communities, and also in Mainland Tanzania, had its own impacts on the disposition of women dependent on the sea, and how they perceived the BE in this context.

Firstly, it was observed that women's participation in certain nodes of anchovy fisheries—and in certain communities—demanded local acceptance into the production space, in this case, in landing sites. At Fungurefu, for example, we learnt about gender bias in the demand that married women were required to produce evidence of their husbands' agreement to engage in a male-dominated space. While such prohibitions were gradually diminishing, they served to curb women from fully working at landing sites, thereby limiting their levels of income generation. A statement from a woman in Fungurefu illustrates this contention:

You know, initially I was married, but when I was divorced I had nothing to do. So I went to the local administrative leader (Sheha) to ask for a letter that stated I was going to Fungurefu as a single woman to do business. The Sheha agreed and gave me the letter; therefore, I came here and started to do an anchovy processing activity. When I arrived here I bought a plot and built a temporary shelter (banda), and settled there. I did not encounter much prejudice as a woman among many men working in the anchovy trade. I bought all the facilities for the activity on my own. However, regarding the capital for the business, I was supported by a man, my brother, who bought for me that plot: an initiative that presumably shielded me from any discrimination that I might have encountered on my own. He also came with the building materials so that I could start the business, and he gave me TZS500,000 for buying anchovies to start my business (Female Trader, Fungurefu, 20/02/2024).

In addition, and as reflected by the experience of this female trader, we observed that kin relations had significant cultural and social value to women in supporting their economic endeavours along the coastal and marine environment. Such cultural prescriptions on gender aspects are seldom captured or even appreciated by macro-processes, such the BE agenda and the intricate dynamics that give permissions or prohibitions for women's engagement in coastal resources or spaces.

Secondly, effective participation and benefitting from the anchovy fisheries required certain resources or production capital. This observation is equally captured by the BE initiatives in both Mainland Tanzania and Zanzibar, which indicate provisions to advance material support to local fishing communities. During the study, we noted that ownership of fishing vessels for anchovy fisheries was central to its sustained production and assured benefits. We also observed that almost all fishing vessels in the study communities were owned by men; only a few were owned by women. In addition to vessel ownership, being known by a vessel owner also dictated the amount of anchovy a woman could receive or buy.

In the course of the study, we observed how local community members were enabled to own fishing vessels to enhance their fishing enterprises. For example, some members of fishing communities in Weshu (Pemba) and Fungurefu (Unguja) had been given fishing vessels and (some) gear—such as boat engines—by the

RGoZ, as part of its implementation of the BE initiatives (RGoZ, 2022). This equipment was given as a loan. However, our interlocutors informed us that though they were highly appreciative of this support, the price they had to pay was high. One of the fishers in Pemba said:

We have been given a boat, a fibre boat, which does not take enough crew because of its smaller size compared to our traditional vessels. Also, it has a small capacity to manage the work for the period we need for the anchovy fishing that we do. In addition, the cost of the fishing gear is high, and I wonder how we are going to return the loan; from what level of fishing effort? It is difficult (Male fisher, Weshu, 03/03/2024).

Investing in people in this manner with equipment and financial support for production was observed as a people-sensitive initiative of the BE, which our women interlocutors also shared as a positive initiative. However, this support was often selective and not widely accessible to women. An industrious female anchovy processor and trader at Fungurefu commented thus:

The BE has allowed fishers to access soft credit for getting fishing vessels and gear to enhance productivity in anchovy fishing. A few women in some villages have received these loans I was told, and I am one of them; but I think I am the only female at Fungurefu to get this BE vessel loan on this landing site to date. I have always been active and courageous to venture into the anchovy business, side by side with men; and probably this is why I was also identified to get a loan of the fishing equipment. I have my own vessel (kingwanda), which I manage. I finance the crew by giving them fuel, and telling them to bring to me the anchovy catches that they get. This is unlike other traders who do not have vessels, but operate through hiring fishing vessels, which is so tough to monitor. Women cannot afford this strategy: I only know of one other woman, Bi AA, who has dared to hire vessels to have direct access to anchovies for processing and selling. But of late, I implored God to enable me get a loan through the BE initiative; and luckily I got a fibre boat. However, I am not happy because I have not been given a loan for fishing gear and engine; so my boat lies idle at the beach, and I have missed taking advantage of this recent spring tide which is the best for fishing to make use of it (Anchovy trader, 24/02/2024).

We also observed several other limitations in the material support that was advanced to people to enhance their production under the name of the BE implementation strategies. In some communities there were issues about the limitations in the quality of drying racks; while in others there were contestations on equitable access to spaces for processing and drying anchovies. One of the study participants explained that "... the racks have taken up much space ... and have taken some of people's land ... but also the available racks are inadequate to meet our needs (Woman trader, Fungurefu, 24/02/24).

But the general narrative was that more women needed such material support since, as one of them emphasised:

... it is through owning a fishing vessel, that you become both the father and the mother of your household, because of the enhanced ability to fend for your home, but so few women are considered to be given vessels in this regard (Female Anchovy Trader, Kiombamvua, 24/02/24).

This statement shows how development-oriented policies sometimes tend to propagate gender-insensitive divisions in economic production, which eventually favour males over females in certain investments, as was experienced in prioritizing men in giving loans for fishing vessels. The FPE approach sees this as policies blindly integrating traditional gender-based hierarchies in the fishing sector, with less consideration on women as able actors (Rocheleau et al., 1996). However, it also shows that, with adequate support, a woman can achieve meaningful employment and sustain herself and her household. Hence, even though women spoke appreciatively of the BE, they pondered whether their capacities were adequately appreciated by its policies.



Photo 2: Drying anchovies at Fungurefu



Photo 3: Drying anchovies at Kiombamvua

Source: Authors, 2023

Further observations at Fungurefu and Kiombamvua showed that the processing of anchovy was predominantly a woman's space, even though sometimes men were also involved in the activity as partners or labourers. At Fungurefu and Kiombamvua, women owned drying land/spaces and facilities used for drying. Also, women—especially in Fungurefu—were employed as porters in carrying anchovies from boats to the drying places. This was especially in landing sites in proximity to anchovy drying grounds. However, the situation was different in Kiombamvua, where it was men who were mostly involved as porters from landing sites to processing areas. Here, the long distance between landing sites and processing locations, including the lack of good roads, discouraged women from engaging as porters of anchovy.

4.4 Contestations and Competition

The use of coastal space and the sea by local communities and women has been prone to multiple contestations between different groups of local users; between local users and their resource management systems; between local users and newcomers (*wakuja*); and between local communities and government authorities. Although the BE introduced strategies that were not entirely new, its implementation was expected to intensify competition. Therefore, it is important to understand how people perceive these processes. The major factors leading to

such contestations were based on the understanding of the rights to space. Among the women, the argument was about whose rights it was to occupy certain spaces over the needs of other groups. We present two examples of such contestations.

One prominent conflict involved the destruction of seaweed farms that was done by fishers, and was widely experienced along the inter-tidal areas across most of the coastal communities. In Mlingotini (Bagamoyo) and Weshu (Pemba), women spoke about their seaweed farms being destroyed by fishermen as they passed through with their vessels. Seaweed farmers contended that fishermen often cut the ropes on which they tie seaweed by their boats. This, they argued, was done with full knowledge of the destruction they caused. The farmers also contended that some fishermen would venture deliberately in between their sea plantations seeking for fish using their ring-nets (*kokoro*), which dragged seaweed plants and ultimately destroyed them. On their side, fishermen claimed that they knowingly entered these plantation areas because of the abundance of fish in the seaweed because *fish feed on them*. A seaweed farmer at Mlingotini claimed:

We complained about the behaviour of fishers to the Bagamoyo District Officials. They came here, and we sat together with the fishers ... and it was seen that, indeed, fishers are a menace to our production. We said we have been complaining to the Beach Management Units (BMUs) leaders ... but nothing positive has been achieved because they [BMUs] ignore us... since we are women. So, when the District officials came, together we agreed on the boundaries and pathways for fishermen to use as they navigate their ways to fishing grounds. We even put identifier buoys to mark where our seaweed plots are located. Yet, the destruction continues. (Seaweed farmer, Mlingotini, 20/10/2023).

These frequent violations of women-dominated production areas was one of the reasons that led to complaints of unfairness towards women, and which were usually committed by fellow local community members. Such unfairness was also echoed when women interlocutors narrated about experiences that exposed them to the risk of vulnerability which they associated with activities regarded as having higher macro-economic potential that were developed in their vicinities, e.g., tourism and related recreation activities. It was explained that the development of tourist activities—such as beach hotels and boating—has often ushered in competition between local communities and tourism promoters and investors; conflicts mostly related to the use of the beach or marine areas; with local communities being disadvantaged in such competitions (Gossling, 2010).

The case of Kiombamvua exemplifies this argument. Initially, processing anchovies at Kiombamvua was conducted along the beach adjacent to landing sites. Producers in the village explained how working along the coastal space not only reduced the cost of doing business (transportation and time), but was also convenient in terms of women's security, especially when fish landings occurred late at night. However, later an investor in tourism was granted the right to construct a tourist hotel in the same area. This development curtailed the local communities' anchovy processing activities, including the freedom of access to the beach area. The women were then forced to look for another area for drying their anchovies, which luckily was made available by the husband of one of the women (*Anchovy trader, Kiombamvua, 20/2/2024*).

Although these women managed to secure another area for their livelihood activities, they still narrated the difficulties they faced, especially due to the increased distance from the seashore to the drying place; as said by one of them:

We had our beach area, then this investor came, and we were informed that we had to move. We even complained to the District Commissioner, yet we were moved. Then we got an area owned by a local person, and we are now using it for drying anchovies. If the beach is free for use and is open access, how do we sustain our rights to earn a livelihood in that area that becomes restricted for private use and we are not considered? (Kiombamvua woman anchovy trader, 20/02/2024).

The study by Mwanyoka et al. (2025) evidenced a similar experience of small producers receiving less privileges in decisions pertaining to ocean resources in the context of BE-related developments. In our study, an experience of such exclusion was seen at Fungurefu landing site where an anchovy processing area, called *Mabandani*, had to be abandoned after fishers from the neighbouring Tumbatu community demanded exclusive ownership of the land, claiming it was their cultural space. Local authorities could not resolve this conflict in the local women's favour despite the fact that women anchovy traders and processors had been using the space for a long time (FGD, Fungurefu, 25/2/24). The local women claimed that they had rightful claims to this space which was signified by their settlement in the site, moving from inland areas to establish businesses there and that they owned about 50% of the sheds along that site. Hence, to them, any decision about the use of this coastal space that failed to consider these women's needs made them vulnerable.

Therefore, even though mainstreaming gender equality in local government and fisheries policies and functions had been initiated for some time, these experiences illustrate that decisions over the control of resources can still be mostly gender-biased, hence limiting women's social advancement (URT, 2015). This reflects the caution by Woodford-Berger (2007) about what she called the myth of 'gender-mainstreaming', and how it is sometimes used to serve political ends without effecting meaningful changes in gender-biased structures and functions. Local authorities carry on such biases, thereby limiting the transformative potential that integrating gender concerns in policy and practice would be expected to bring.

Kiombamvua's women's experiences, as illustrated above, reproduced a picture that shows minimal/limited community recognition, and mostly women's participation, in the implementation of the BE and other economic policies. According to the FPE theory, this entailed marginalization and exclusion in decisions that affected their lives and livelihoods (Dewan, 2023). This is close to Dewan's famous phrase which reflects the "economic dispossession of the marginalised and powerless" (Dewan, 2023). These results also corroborates the arguments advanced by Mwanyoka et al. (2025) and Khatib and Ndensajo (2025) regarding the marginalization of artisanal and small actors in the utilization of ocean resources.

4.5 Transformations and Resilience

In spite of the challenges experienced by coastal women, what was also evident in their narratives was that they had embraced changes as inevitable developments in

coastal livelihood activities. This is evident in their increasing engagement in seaweed farming and long-distance anchovy trading. One of the female anchovy traders at Fungurefu, Mama SS, said that “*Mwanamke mchakarikaji ndie mwenyewe*” (lit: An industrious woman is the best, 24/2/24). Mama SS’s contention on the importance of hard work for women working along the coast in Fungurefu was replicated by other women across the study communities. A female seaweed farmer who was residing at Dunda (Bagamoyo), had this to say:

Seaweed farming is a tedious and hands-on activity, and it makes me spend at least a couple of hours for four days a week. We (me and my group members) have to walk for some distance from our homes to the coastal area where our farms are located. Most of us are newcomers to the coastal area: almost half of our 20-member group come from up-country, and joined this group through neighbourhood mobilization. So, we did not know the sea before; but as with other ocean-based activities, such as cucumber farming, this is a recent activity that is not bound by any cultural limitations on women. The coast is changing.... bringing in new activities and new people ... but still, as women, we have to work hard, hoping that new management initiatives on ocean resources will continue to support us (Seaweed farmer, Dunda, 26/20/2023).

Such was also the feeling of Mama SS at Fungurefu, whose own personal experience indicated such resilience. According to her, she relocated to Fungurefu after an amicable divorce with her first husband, and after a time was able to secure a small drying space for anchovies; where she erected a shelter along with a small storage facility. Her unmarried status enabled her to assert her independence at the Fungurefu landing site, whose residents spoke about the ‘*reserved treatment accorded to single women*’ at the site. Mama SS narrated that her industriousness also gave her some acceptance and capacity to mingle with men in buying, processing and trading in processed anchovies with local and foreign traders. Operating side by side with male traders, she eventually turned to be one of the most successful traders; supplying anchovies to foreign traders who came from as far as the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), and also traders from Mainland Tanzania.

Hence, in spite of the narrated challenges that women experienced in their activities on the coastal and marine environment, coastal women in our study communities showed how they persistently managed to navigate around changes and limitations to pursue opportunities availed by the BE. Such forms of adoption confirm the FPE’s contentions that women have agency; and the silent struggles that they engage in—such as at production fronts or in resource access—are all forms of resistance to gender-biased dominating tendencies: be they largely capitalist-oriented, or of a patriarchal nature (Rocheleau et al., 1996).

5. Conclusions

This study has explored how women dependent on coastal and marine resources speak about the BE agenda, which they perceive through their experiences with the sea, and how they relate their current and future livelihoods as reliant on their continued engagement with this sea. Continuity in their ability to exploit resources was of primary importance. For women, it was inevitable that new developments on the uses of the sea will bring changes, such as what is propagated by BE initiatives,

but these changes should not be to their disadvantage. These women's narratives are expressions of the social and cultural aspects that need to inform BE decisions. Coastal women recognize that since they are not exclusive of the inevitable changes in coastal and marine resource governance systems, they would want their experiences, and thus needs, to be part of the planning of these governance systems, which significantly influence their livelihoods. Also important, is how the women illustrate the ways that local producers connect to the BE processes, and how without understanding these, the BE agenda will not be inclusive. It is thus imperative that the issues raised from the women's perspectives and experiences be incorporated in the BE initiatives to protect the rights of women, thereby making the BE agenda more meaningful to the coastal communities.

The contestations—and equally, triumphs—that women experience, are both seen as part of the sustainability agenda that needs to be associated with the BE initiatives in the country. They also illustrate the importance of BE policies and frameworks to be cognizant of local communities' perceptions and experiences of access and resource tenure rights; the failure of which will subject certain groups of individuals, especially women and other marginalised members in the communities, to pauperism and livelihood vulnerabilities.

Several recommendations can be made following the above observations. One is related to the whole system of community engagement in BE interventions. It is recommended that community consultation processes should not only ensure equal gender representation, but adopt an investigative qualitative approach to allow women to share their lived experiences about BE-related processes. It is also recommended that decisions on BE interventions should best proceed when gender-sensitive decision-making structures have been instituted to inform resource access and management at all governance levels.

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