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Women's Inclusion in the Blue Economy in Zanzibar

Mary Mtumwa Khatib [*]

Abstract

Zanzibar is a leading hub for the Blue Economy (BE) in the Western Indian Ocean region. The ocean-based economy contributes over 37% to Zanzibar's GDP, and about 17.5% of women are employed in fisheries and aquaculture (mostly seaweed). However, these ocean-based livelihoods are associated with climate sensitive activities and the effects of climate change. Based on ethnographic qualitative fieldwork in Unguja and Pemba islands, this study builds on interviews with fishermen, seaweed farmers, collectors of molluscs and prawns, and technical officers from the Ministry of Blue Economy of Zanzibar. The findings demonstrate that women's inclusiveness remains a challenge, since most BE officials—and even local communities—face challenges in operationalizing effective strategies to integrate women into various socioeconomic development. Although most women are well informed of the initiatives that take place in their areas, they have limited participation in capacity building and empowerment efforts that can transform their livelihoods. These limitations are becoming an urgent matter due to population growth, diminishing marine resources, and increasing climate change impacts.

Keywords: *women inclusion, blue economy, climate vulnerability, Reach-Engage-Transform framework*

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1. Introduction

> *Uchumi wa buluu ni dhana pana yenye kubeba maana nzima ya kutumia kila rasilimali itokanayo na bahari ikiwemo utalii, uvuvi, kilimo cha mwani, bandari pamoja na mafuta na gesi zilizomo baharini.*
>
> [The Blue Economy is a comprehensive development strategy focused on leveraging the full range of the ocean's resources, including tourism, fishing, seaweed farming, ports, and offshore oil and gas.]
>
> *Dr Hussein Ali Mwinyi*
> https://x.com/DrHmwinyi/status/1434788418106630144

This vision of Zanzibar's Blue Economy [BE], championed by President Hussein Ali Mwinyi, is more than just a government policy; it is a framework for improving livelihoods that is deeply understood and articulated by local communities. As one study participant noted, the program is viewed as a means to "… use the sea as part of production or as part of the country's economy," reinforcing its direct relevance to daily life.

[*] Tropical Research Center for Oceanography, Environmental and Natural Resources (TROCEN), State University of Zanzibar: Marry.khatib@suza.ac.tz/mamkhat@yahoo.com ORCID: 0009-0009-4509-8287

A significant implementation gap persists between the policy's intentions and its on-the-ground reality. Women remain systematically marginalized in key sectors such as fisheries, tourism, and aquaculture; facing deep-seated barriers to resources, training, and decision-making. These disparities are rooted in the socio-cultural norms and power dynamics that govern access to economic opportunities. The Zanzibar Blue Economy Policy (2022) acknowledges inclusion, but the disconnect is evident in the practical needs expressed by participants; such as the call for 'tools' and 'factories' to enhance production and livelihoods.

Empirical research supports this, demonstrating women's involvement in fisheries and aquaculture, but limited engagement in tourism (Mahmoud, 2021; Charisiadou et al., 2022; Pike et al., 2024; Dogeje et al., 2025). The policy, while prioritizing institutional capacity and infrastructure development, often overlooks women's inclusion in high-value areas like post-harvest loss management and value-addition.

Limited involvement of women in marine and maritime governance is a persistent issue. As one interviewee revealed, "I myself have never been involved in anything related to the blue economy. It is possible that my colleagues were already called because not all people are involved, samples are usually taken." This quote provides a direct evidence of the selective and limited nature of public participation; a disconnect that mirrors the findings by Bennett et al. (2024) regarding women's often unrecognized and unpaid contributions. Inclusion thus necessitates mechanisms for women's direct involvement in both policy formulation and implementation.

Contemporary strategies for women's inclusion are largely inefficacious, concentrating on short-term training programs and small-scale equipment that lack the requisite capacity for delivering sustainable empowerment. One participant's account was thus: "I have already received training and some equipment, but the training itself was only for three days and the equipment were just ropes that are used to tie seaweed. … It's not possible for someone to gain expertise in something in just three days. So, to be honest, we do things more out of habit than with skill, which is why there are often more challenges than we expect to succeed." Moreover, women's roles are often viewed through the lens of traditional coastal practices, limiting their potential for transformative participation and the realization of their full capabilities. This limited impact underscores the gap between the stated policy objectives of inclusion, and the actual outcomes experienced by women; raising critical questions about whether current approaches expand women's capabilities and empowerment as envisioned by Nussbaum (2000), thereby contributing to positive impacts on development.

1.1 The Lasting Legacy of Women in Zanzibar's Ocean Economy

The BE policy aims for inclusivity, but it must be understood within a legacy of shifting power structures that have influenced women's roles in the ocean economy over time.

1.1.1 Women's Pre-Colonial Roles and Influence

Women on the Swahili coast, including Zanzibar, held significant power and influence in pre-colonial societies. Though historical records often focus on male-dominated long-distance trade and religious texts (Wynne-Jones, 2018), other sources reveal women's lasting legacy. For instance, according to Askew (1999) and Wynne-Jones (2018), women were not excluded from political decision-making. Portuguese historical texts and oral traditions mention a number of female rulers/queens from as early as the 1500s. Mwana Mkisi, a ruler of Mombasa, and several female leaders of Tumbatu in the 19th century illustrate this historical political presence.

Women were also active and crucial participants in the ocean economy. They were the primary producers of pottery, textiles; and were heavily involved in shellfish collection (Fleisher, 2003; Juma, 2004). They controlled the space where foreign merchants were hosted, and used feasts and hospitality to cement social and economic alliances (Wynne-Jones, 2018). Moreover, the pre-colonial Swahili society maintained a division between male-dominated public spaces and female-dominated private domains. Nevertheless, women exercised power through customs (*mila*) and rituals. Archaeological findings—such as the discovery of beads in mosques (Rødland et al., 2020)—suggest that women were once allowed in these spaces; indicating a greater fluidity in gender roles than what is assumed today.

1.1.2 Contemporary Roles and Influence of Women

Historically, the ocean economy has often been perceived as a male-dominated sphere, overlooking the significant contributions of women (Knott & Gustavsson, 2022). While this perception has been challenged since the 1970s, and actors increasingly acknowledging women's roles (Lichna et al., 2023), challenges remain in accurately representing these contributions (Kleiber et al., 2015), and achieving gender equality (Gopal et al., 2020; Soliman, 2022; Williams, 2023).

In Zanzibar, this historical oversight is particularly relevant. Colonial and postcolonial governance structures often relegated women to domestic roles, marginalizing them from development planning and implementation. This dynamic—rooted in historical politics of governance and gender—led to men dominating the management and leadership of development activities (Strobel, 1979; Kaplan, 1982). While this may have fostered a degree of women's self-management within their constrained spheres, it ultimately restricted their capabilities and freedoms within the broader ocean economy context. This reinforces the gap between policy rhetoric and lived experience, highlighting the need to move beyond mere representation towards inclusion (Sen, 2005).

The impact of this marginalization extends beyond individual limitations. As evidenced by broader research, inequality—including gender inequality—is associated with social 'bads,' such as increased social conflicts, political instabilities, and declines in social trust (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009; Scheffer et al.,

2017). This is relevant to Zanzibar, where historical and contemporary access to marine resources has been a source of both community cohesion and potential conflict (Cole et al., 1994; Commission for Lands, 2018).

The legacy of colonial economic policies, which often emphasized liberalization and trickle-down effects, has also contributed to persistent inequalities. While such approaches have achieved some success in poverty reduction, they have simultaneously widened inequalities both nationally and globally (Alvaredo et al., 2018). This includes the consolidation of industries, further impacting equitable access to economic opportunities (Blasiak et al., 2018; Monacelli et al., 2018). Therefore, for Zanzibar's blue growth initiatives to foster just economic transitions, they must actively promote an increased and equitable participation of women (Soliman, 2022; Williams, 2023; Bennett et al., 2024); and address the power relations that manifest in ocean governance (Knott & Gustavsson, 2022). By understanding the historical context of gender roles and governance, and by addressing the current structural and cultural barriers, Zanzibar can move towards a more inclusive and equitable BE.

2. A Methodological Approach to Understanding Women's Inclusion in Zanzibar's Blue Economy

The fieldwork for this study was conducted in Unguja and Pemba, the main islands of the Zanzibar archipelago. An innovative, three-stage framework, 'Reach-Engage-Transform,' was developed to analyse women's inclusion in the BE; moving beyond simple participation metrics to examine the deeper impacts on women's lives, and their ability to exercise agency.

2.1 The Reach-Engage-Transform Framework

The 'reach' aspect of the framework investigates how BE policies and programs are made accessible to women. This stage examines their awareness of opportunities and benefits, the accessibility of these initiatives, and the effectiveness of communication between women and stakeholders. Ensuring effective reach is foundational, as it addresses the initial step of access to information and resources—a common barrier to women's participation that requires addressing institutional access and equity (Cornwall, 2016; Fraser, 2021).

The 'engage' aspect explores how women are actively involved in BE activities. This involves focusing on their participation in decision-making processes related to resource management and policy formulation, opportunities for collaboration with various stakeholders, and the extent to which they are empowered to actively contribute. This requires that women's voices are heard, their perspectives are valued, and they have real influence over development initiatives; i.e., moving beyond lip-service towards authentic participation and co-creation (Gaventa, 2006; Chambers & Conway, 2022).

The 'transform' aspect analyses how women's lives are fundamentally changed through their participation in BE interventions. Transformation, in this context, refers to a fundamental shift in women's capabilities, freedoms, and overall well-being; often leading to changes in socio-cultural norms and power relations. This

aligns directly with Nussbaum's (2000) capabilities approach, which argues that development should be measured by the expansion of people's capabilities to live lives they have reason to value; and with Kabeer's (2012) framework that emphasizes the process of empowerment through resources, agency, and achievements.

2.2 Data Collection and Triangulation

To investigate the framework's interconnected aspects, a qualitative approach was employed. This methodological triangulation incorporated focus group discussions (FGDs) with extension officers, in-depth interviews with both government officers and coastal women, and ethnographic observation. Ethnographic observation was conducted to view the activities in their real environment: specifically the planting, harvesting, and drying of seaweed, as well as the drying of small fish. This afforded the researcher the opportunity to converse with the participants while observing the actual reality of women's activities in the coastal zone; all of which allowed for a more comprehensive understanding of women's inclusion. The use of ethnography was particularly crucial for an anthropological understanding of women's inclusion, as it allowed the researcher to gain deep insights into the cultural meanings, social practices, and power dynamics shaping people's lives (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019).

During data collection, the framework presented a challenge in participants' ability to differentiate between the three concepts, with some misinterpreting the 'reach' phase as a form of empowerment. To address this, the researcher ensured participants understood the distinct meaning and level of each concept through a detailed and iterative probing during interviews. This methodological rigor ensured an in-depth understanding of participants' lived experiences.

Photo 1: Ethnographic Observation in Pemba During Fieldwork

Source: Author

3. The Gradual Progress of the Blue Economy in Zanzibar

The ocean economy has been integral to the livelihoods of Zanzibari coastal communities for generations, particularly through fishing, trade, and tourism (Khatib, 2019; Österblom et al., 2020). This traditional reliance on marine resources forms a crucial backdrop for understanding the recent shift towards the BE.

Zanzibar's formal focus on the BE began around 2015, accelerating with a strategic focus on oil and gas exploration. This ambition was encapsulated in a statement by the then-president of Zanzibar, who expressed the vision of Zanzibar becoming the 'Dubai of East Africa' due to the anticipated economic development (*Zanzibar Leo*, 2018). This grand vision of rapid, large-scale economic transformation, however, appears to clash with the reality of existing small-scale livelihoods, which have been sustained through traditional practices for generations. This disparity between a grand national vision, and on-the-ground realities, risks overshadowing the needs and contributions of small-scale actors, particularly women, who rely on traditional sectors like seaweed farming and artisanal fisheries.

Yawezekana Zanzibar ikawa Dubai ya Afrika Mashariki

NA DK. JUMA MOHAMMED,MAELEZO

Dubai tunayoiona leo haikuzuka tu kama baadhi ya watu wanavyofikiri, Dubai ilikuwa ni mashimo wa kutupwa, shughuli kubwa ya kiuchumi ilikuwa ni uvuvi na kutafuta lulu kutoka kwenye samaki aina ya oyster kwa maelfu ya miaka.

Maisha ya Dubai yalianza kubadilika Mwaka 1966 baada ya ugunduzi wa rasilimali ya mafuta, hii ilibadilisha nchi kupitia maelezo na kufanya Dubai kuwa nchi ya kisasa na kituo cha biashara cha dunia.

Ukoo wa Al Makhtoum utabaki katika kumbukumbu za Watu wa Dubai na Dunia kwa ujumla kwa kubuni kwao mipango ya maendeleo kwa kutekeleza dira ya maendeleo ambayo leo imewafikisha katika kilele cha maendeleo.

Viongozi wa Ukoo huo wa Al Makhtoum chabaha yao kuu ilikuwa ni kufanya Dubai kuwa kitovu cha biashara na utalii katika Mashariki ya Kati.Mwenye macho hsambiwi tazama, mambo leo ni tofuti, kila mmoja anakimbilia Dubai.

Rais wetu Dk. Shein nae ana dhamira ya kuyafanana na Viongozi wa Dubai,

KIAIS wa Zanzibar na Mwenyekiti wa Baraza la Mapinduzi ekiupata maelezo kuhusiana na muonekanao wa Bandari ya jebel Ali, nchini Dubai, kutoka kwa Mkurugenzi wa Bandari hiyo. (picha na maktaba)

Si chani wala si kioja . Kwa kutazama jiografia ya Zanzibar ni jambo lenye kupendeza zaidi kati ya jambo ambalo tunaweza kulianisha kwa kutazama mfano wa wenzetu Dubai ni kuanzisha Bandari huru na Maeneo Huru.

Bandari huru ina faida nyingi katika kukuza uchumi wa nchi,kukuza ajira hasa kwa vijana na wanawake, kuongeza fedha za kigeni na kumarika kwa biashara, usafiri na usafirishaji.

Mungi mkuu wa uwekezaji ni vivutio hivyo kwa muingeria ya jiografia ya Zanzibar yanaweza kumwezesha mwekezaji kuvutika zaidi kuwekeza kuliko sehemu nyingine ya Afrika.

Na hi ni kwa sababu ili kumudu gharama za uendeshaji, mwekezaji hulazimika kuleta fedha za kigeni nchini na kuzitaadili kupata fedha za nchi husika kulipia gharama za uendeshaji ikwemo mishahara, umeme, maji na mengineyo.

Mfanohai ni Dubai amboo wametumia fursa ya kijiografia kuifanya UAE (Dubai) soko kuu la dunia kwa kuwezesha 'Re-

sarafu ya ndani kuwa imara.

Katika EPZ na "re-export centers" mwekezaji huwa hapowe kufanya kuchagia kutoroshe fedha za kigeni kutoka nchi husika kwenda nje ya nchi.

Inatiwenka kuwa mwekezaji katika EPZ hutoa soko kwa malighafi inayozalikana katika nchi husika. Wakiwekeza katika macao ya ualuzima huchangia kutoa soko la macao ya ualuzima na kuchangia sera ya kuongeza thamani ya macao ya ualuzima.

Fedha nyingine ya EPZ ni kuchangia uchumi na ustawi wa nchi husika kwa kutoa ajira, kukuza teknolojia, kulipa kodi. Mwekezaji katika EPZ hutumia huduma za ulinga uchumi wa ummo na watu binafsi vilivyoko nchini. Kwa kufanya hivi wawekezaji huongeza mungako wa fedha nchini na kuwa chachu ya sera sahihi ya kukuza uchumi na kuondoa umasikini.

Ziara ya Rais Dk. Shein inawezo sasa kutufungua macho hasa takitazama miradi mikubwa kama ya offshore banking na ile ya Ajumaira Beach

Photo 2: Paper clip titled: 'Zanzibar may become the Dubai of East Africa'

Photo 3: Signing a Production Sharing Agreement for the oil and gas sector in Tanzania

ZANZIBAR LEO 3

Meli tatu zaja kufanya utafiti wa mafuta

NA HAFSA GOLO

MELI tatu za kigeni zinatarajiwa kuwasili nchini leo kwa ajili ya kufanya utafiti wa mafuta na gesi katika eneo la bahari.

Mtaalamu wa miamba ya mafuta wa Mamlaka ya Udhibiti wa Utafutaji na Uchimbaji wa Mafuta na Gesi Asilia Zanzibar, Adam Abdalla Makame, alieleza hayo alipokua akizungumza na gazeti hili ofisini kwakwe Forodhani mjini Unguja.

Alisema meli hizo zitafanya ya kutafuta nishati hizo kupitia kwenye miamba pamoja na kubaini aina ya miamba yenye uwezekano wa kuzalisha nishati hizo.

Alisema kati ya meli hizo, moja itahusika na shughuli ya

Photo 4: Paper clip titled: 'Three ships to carry out oil exploration'

Photos 2, 3, and 4 display a vision of Zanzibar becoming the 'Dubai of East Africa', showcasing the ambition of the country due to anticipated economic development. (Source: *Zanzibar Leo Magazine*, 2018).

Zanzibar's BE strategy explicitly aims to link economic development with social inclusion, with a specific focus on empowering women and the youth (Blue

Economy Policy, 2022). The implementation phase began by the end of 2018, prioritizing five key areas: fisheries and aquaculture, maritime trade and infrastructure, energy (including oil and gas), tourism, and marine governance.

Upon assuming power, the current government institutionalized this vision, solidifying these pillars by establishing a dedicated Ministry of Blue Economy and Fisheries. This institutionalization was marked by the development of key policy and strategic documents, including the Blue Economy Policy (2022), and the Blue Economy Strategy (2022). While the RGoZ aims to integrate gender inclusion into these strategies, achieving appropriate inclusion for women faces persistent challenges. This raises critical questions about how gender inclusion is being operationalized: specifically, whether policy implementation adequately moves beyond merely applying a 'gender lens' to existing initiatives, to actively and fundamentally transforming the structures and processes that perpetuate gender inequalities (Cornwall, 2016).

Despite previous studies highlighting positive developments—such as increased participation in seaweed and seafood processing (Jiddawi & Öhman, 2002; Mahmoud, 2021)—the findings of this study suggest that the BE has not yet achieved widespread transformative change for the majority of women. Even when women are organized into groups and receive funding, they often remain trapped in cycles of poverty. This is due, in part, to the control exerted by donors or buyers, who often dictate the purchase price of harvested seaweed, creating a system of dependency rather than empowerment. This system creates a 'poverty trap', where women are unable to break free from economic hardship despite their participation in BE activities (Banerjee et al., 2011).

3.1 Are BE Initiatives Reaching Women's Lives?

In Zanzibar, socio-cultural norms, heavily influenced by Islamic traditions and local customs (*mila*), frequently assign women the primary responsibility for domestic duties (childcare, cooking, water collection, and household management). This confines their activities largely to the private household sphere, while traditionally limiting their participation in highly visible public life and large-scale economic activities, such as deep-sea fishing or high-level trade. This structural context, where religious and customary practices shape gendered labour divisions, is crucial for understanding the challenges of women's inclusion in the BE. It means their existing economic contributions—like seaweed farming and artisanal seafood processing—are often relegated to low-value, near-shore activities that are easily overlooked by top-down development initiatives (Österblom et al., 2020; Bennett et al., 2024).

3.1.1 Views of Government Officers on Reaching Women

The findings of this study reveal a significant divergence in perspectives between government officers and women regarding the reach of BE initiatives. Directors and officers generally believe that women have been effectively reached, citing efforts to address challenges such as the lack of equipment, financial resources, training, and

skills. They point to various initiatives, including educational programs disseminated through meetings, media, and community gatherings; alongside specific programs focused on seaweed cultivation, chicken farming, and training in swimming. Officers also emphasize the existence of a gender strategy and action plan (2022), supported by UN Women, as evidence of their commitment to women's inclusion.

This top-down approach that prioritises policy dissemination, often faces constraints in adequately accounting for the complex on-the-ground realities and structural barriers that impede women's access and participation. This is rooted in the assumption that benefits will 'trickle down' to the target population (Mosse, 2005). However, this trickle-down perspective is problematic and insufficient because it systematically fails to address underlying structural inequalities—such as socio-cultural norms, household dynamics, and market asymmetries—that shape women's lives (Rocheleau et al., 1996; Kabeer, 2012). Consequently, while government officials may perceive effective reach through policy dissemination, the actual impact on women's lives may be severely limited; a core critique of development models that prioritize macroeconomic growth over equitable distribution and local agency (Gaventa, 2006).

3.1.2 View of Women on How they are Reached

The analysis of focus group discussions and interview data revealed a widespread uncertainty and scepticism among women regarding the effectiveness of outreach efforts. Women reported a lack of consultation and participation in policy formulation processes, stating they were not given the opportunity to voice their concerns. This exclusion was underscored by a woman in Bumbwini, who stated, "*… hawajawahi kuja kutuuliza huu uchumi buluu uwe vipi kwa upande wetu sisi wanawake*" (they have never come to ask us about this BE, and how it will be for us women). She further elaborated:

> *Mmmhh! If you ask me the meaning of the Blue Economy, maybe I should say it's the things that strengthen the economy through the sea. Because the Blue Economy staff came to us one day with their Blue Economy t-shirts and wanted us to buy them – and that's when they informed us that the Blue Economy comes with boats and some tools to strengthen the economy. But! Since those people came, we haven't seen them again until today, and here in our village we only got one boat for male fishermen!* ***(Woman fisher in Bumbwini, Unguja, 2023).***

This woman's account reveals a superficial engagement, characterized by a brief visit focused on selling merchandise rather than engaging in meaningful dialogue, or needs assessment. This practice constitutes a transactional form of outreach that falls short of the principles of collaborative development (Cornwall, 2020). The exclusive distribution of boats to male fishermen exemplifies this disparity: perpetuating a development model that marginalizes women from key resources and profitable supply chains (Österblom et al., 2020).

Furthermore, her definition—"the things that strengthen the economy through the sea"—while broadly accurate, reveals a limited grasp of the broader principles of

sustainability and integrated ocean management that underpin the BE (World Bank, 2017). This indicates a substantial communication gap in outreach. This implementation challenge is further highlighted by the example from Michamvi: "The carts (*vihori vya kubebea mwani*) that were brought to us do not help us much because the distance we walk is long when the water is out, so, it is the carts that we just drag, they do not help in reducing the weight of the distance." The provision of inappropriate technology, without adequate local consultation, demonstrates a significant disconnect between policy design and the operational realities faced by women seaweed farmers.

Photo 5: Women's journeys during low tide in Michamvi, Unguja
Source: Author

Photo 6: *Kihori*, a tool originally provided for seaweed transport
Source: Author

The focus on technological provision, without adequate consultation regarding women's specific needs and existing practices, demonstrates a structural issue: the agenda of the provider often takes precedence over the needs of the recipient. For instance, the *kihori*, once a tool originally provided for seaweed transport, has been repurposed for construction and water storage, highlighting a shift in resource use without even the consultation with the users. One woman in Michamvi provided a powerful testimony to this disconnect, stating:

> *Wataalamu wetu hawajawahipo kuja kutuuliza nini hasa tunataka tutekelezewe katika huu mpango wa uchumi buluu. Wao wanakaa katika ofisi na kupanga vitu vya kututekelezea na kutuletea. Kwa mfano, walituletea vihori vya kubebea mwani. Lakini baada ya kuvipokea vihori hivyo tuliona havitusaidii katika shughuli zetu za mwani, na kutokana na hali hiyo sisi tuliamua kuvibadilishia matumizi. Vihori hivyo sasa vinatumika kwa shuhuli za kujengea: yaani, tunavikodishia kwa mafundi ujenzi, na wao wanavitumia kuhifadhia maji ya kujengea. Tunakodishia vihori hivyo kwa Sh. 1,000 kwa siku. Pesa tunazopata zinatusaidia katika kuendeshea mambo yetu, kama vile kununua vifaa vya mwani, na kununua kamba na tai za kufungia mwani* ***(Woman fisher in Michamvi, Unguja, 2023)***
>
> [Our experts in BE have never come to ask us what we actually want to be implemented in this BE program. They sit in offices and plan things for us to implement, and bring them to us. For example, they brought us seaweed carrying carts (*vihori*). But after receiving these carts, we realized they don't help us in our seaweed farming activities; and due to this situation, we decided to change their use.

> These carts are now used for construction activities; that is, we rent them out to builders, who in turn use them to store construction water. We rent these carts for TZS1,000 per day. The money we get helps us fund other things, e.g., buying seaweed farming equipment such as ropes and ties for securing the seaweed].

This testimony from a seaweed farmer in Michamvi powerfully illustrates the disconnect between top-down BE planning and the operational realities of women's lives on the ground. The farmer explicitly states: "Our experts have never come to ask us what we actually want implemented." This underscores a fundamental challenge to effective policy implementation: the absence of prior consultation and participatory planning (Chambers, 1983; Cornwall, 2003). The disconnect between policy design and local realities highlights the critical importance of participatory approaches to development, which emphasize the inclusion of marginalized groups, such as women, in decision-making processes (Cornwall, 2016). This lack of substantive participation risks fostering exclusion and disempowerment, thus undermining the effectiveness and sustainability of BE initiatives. Consequently, achieving institutionalized gender equality remains limited, as specific gender-focused legislation is often absent, and the data on women's roles, including their participation in decision-making, is scarce (Lichna et al., 2023; Bennett et al., 2024; Gaventa & McGee, 2023). The observed limited participation stems from a confluence of local patriarchal norms and institutional constraints, emphasizing the necessity of a thoroughly investigated and context-specific approach to achieving gender equality in Zanzibar's BE.

3.1.3 Lack of Active Involvement

Development initiatives aimed at empowering marginalized groups are most effective when local communities actively participate in identifying needs and designing solutions. However, the prevailing top-down approach, where officials operate from a distance, often perceives communities—particularly women with limited formal education—as lacking the requisite knowledge to engage in self-determined decision-making, or plan their own development. This perception leads to a unilateral imposition of plans, rooted in the assumption that central 'experts' are best positioned to determine and provide optimal solutions (De Waal, 2018). This practice critically impedes recognize local knowledge and expertise, thereby challenging community agency and project sustainability.

The example of the seaweed carts (*vihori*) perfectly illustrates the consequences of this lack of consultation. The 'experts' failed to understand the specific complex challenges faced by women seaweed farmers, such as the long distances they must walk during low tide, rendering the carts unsuitable for their intended purpose. This highlights the vital importance of incorporating local knowledge into development planning (Scoones, 2013).

Despite the inadequacy of the provided technology, the women of Michamvi demonstrated remarkable resourcefulness and adaptability. They repurposed the carts for construction activities, generating income that they then reinvested in their

seaweed farming. This highlights the agency and resilience of women in the face of flawed interventions. However, it also underscores a critical missed opportunity: had the experts engaged in asset-based community development (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993), and consulted with the women beforehand, they could have provided tailored support that maximized the BE initiative's direct impact. Proper inclusion requires actively involving women in decision-making, valuing their knowledge, and ensuring that initiatives address their specific priorities: thereby moving beyond merely applying a 'gender component' (Razavi, 2005).

3.1.4 Education and Training

During the research that led to this study, many women expressed concerns about their limited access to BE education; reporting only infrequent, short-term seminars typically lasting a few days. This exposure has led many women to perceive themselves as lacking the necessary knowledge and skills to fully benefit from the BE. The women clearly perceive these brief opportunities as insufficient to provide the knowledge required for effective participation, as evidenced by the statement of a woman from Tumbe, north of Pemba:

> *Haya nkuulize mama, elimu yatolewa kwa siku tatu? Elimu hasa kwa maana ya elimu! Hapa labda alopata elimu ni huyu ntoto wetu wa kike aliyeenda kusomeshwa yapata miezi miwili au mitatu kwa vipindi tofauti—ndio akajua kuogelea* ***(Seaweed farmer in Tumbe, Pemba, 2023).***
>
> [Let me ask you, ma'am, is education given for three days? Education, in the true sense of education! Here, perhaps the one who received education is this girl of ours who went to be trained for about two or three months in different periods – that's how she learned to swim].

This statement reveals a critical perception among coastal women: that the short-term training opportunities offered within the context of the BE are insufficient to provide them with the knowledge and skills necessary for effective participation and economic empowerment. The speaker's emphasis on "education, in the true sense of education!" highlights a clear distinction between brief workshops and the sustained learning required to develop expertise. This perception of inadequate training resonates with broader critiques of short-term development interventions that often fail to deliver lasting impacts (Banerjee et al., 2011). The fact that the speaker contrasts these short workshops with a more extended training period (two or three months) that resulted in a tangible skill (swimming) further emphasizes the perceived inadequacy of the former. This view suggests that many coastal women perceive a low standard of education related to the BE.

While some training has been provided, primarily focused on environmental conservation and low-level seaweed value-chain aspects (like soap or flour production), most women have yet to acquire the comprehensive expertise required to produce high-quality, marketable products. These brief training sessions—though often labelled as 'capacity building'—present two main limitations. First, they tend to be superficial, resulting in a 'knowledge-action gap' where participants

receive information but lack the extensive skill set necessary to translate that knowledge into profitable ventures. Second, by not addressing structural barriers—such as unequal access to capital or reliable markets (Bennett et al., 2024)—these interventions inadvertently risk reinforcing the perception that the core issue resides in the women's individual skill deficits, rather than addressing the underlying systemic inequalities (Kabeer, 1999).

This lack of comprehensive capacity building perpetuates gender inequalities, as women are confined to low-value activities, hindering their ability to move up the value chain or control production. This is why many producers of seaweed products are left with a fluctuating market, as one mother from Paje explained:

> *"Hapa kuuza kwetu waje watalii ambao wanataka kutuunga mkono ndio tunauza; soko hasa ambalo la kusambaza na kuuza bidhaa hatujawa nalo la uhakika."*
>
> [Here, our selling depends on tourists who want to support us; that's when we sell. We haven't yet had a reliable market for distributing and selling products.]

This situation reveals the unequal power dynamics that systematically marginalize coastal women in Zanzibar. Their limited access to decision-making processes within the BE framework prevents them from effectively articulating their needs and priorities. The imposition of pre-determined plans and strategies—without substantive consultations—further disempowers women and undermines their motivation to manage their own economic activities. This dynamic aligns with broader analyses highlighting how unequal power relations, often embedded within institutional structures and development practices, can systematically exclude marginalized groups from meaningful participation (Ali, 2015). In the context of Zanzibar's BE, the lack of consultation and imposition of pre-determined plans exemplify these power imbalances, reinforcing women's marginalization and significantly hindering their agency.

4. Building Women's Capacity in BE Initiatives

Development initiatives, particularly those targeting marginalized groups like women, demonstrate increased efficacy and long-term sustainability when predicated on substantive local community participation. The pervasive adoption of top-down approaches, where external experts unilaterally design interventions, often leads to irrelevant or counterproductive outcomes, inherently undermining local ownership and capacity. This systemic issue is particularly evident in discussions surrounding the Blue Economy (BE), which is frequently framed through an expansive frontier narrative prioritizing macro-economic growth over complex social and political realities (Barbesgaard, 2023). This framing reflects a fundamental misunderstanding of local contexts and a disregard for the agency of those being 'developed' (de Waal, 2018). Furthermore, interventions often prove inadequate because they are structured around predetermined, transferable 'solutions', rather than on locally negotiated political and social realities (Mosse, 2023). This structural deficiency in integrating local knowledge perpetuates dependency, and ultimately diminishes indigenous expertise.

The practical integration of women into BR initiatives, specifically in seaweed cultivation and processing**,** has yielded significant community impact, yet crucial structural challenges persist. Early skill gaps were addressed through training provided by the Ministry of Blue Economy and partnering entities, such as Milele, with women receiving prioritized instruction reflecting their central role in processing activities (Msuya et al., 2017). Women constitute the majority of participants and frequently manage group finances, a practice rooted in a strong community perception that channelling funds through women promotes greater financial stability and responsible management ('money stays to the women it becomes stable') (Shechambo et al., 1996; Msuya, 2012). This reliance on women for fiscal discipline underscores the recognition of local agency and expertise that often operates outside formal project designs. This paradox is further highlighted by the governance structures: while formally supported BE groups typically reserve executive positions (e.g., chairman, secretary) for men, women have concurrently established and successfully governed their own self-organized entities (like Bidiizetu, Umoja Kazi, and Ipo sababu), holding all key leadership roles (UNEP, 2022). This demonstrates an active, adaptive local response that effectively circumvents the prescriptive, male-centric leadership templates imposed by external, top-down structures. Although economic livelihoods have improved, with tangible outcomes such as the ability to purchase capital assets, the community's persistent advocacy for government intervention to address the critical shortage of boats and access to equipment loans indicates that the BE's initial macro-economic focus (Barbesgaard, 2023; Louey, 2022) continues to overlook the fundamental operational and logistical support necessary for achieving economic autonomy**.**

5. Women's Economic Transformation in Zanzibar's BE

This section presents a contrasting narrative regarding women's economic empowerment in Zanzibar's BE. While managerial and governmental perspectives emphasize significant positive changes, the voices of the women themselves reveal persistent challenges and inequalities. Specifically, the data presented herein highlight a divergence in perspectives regarding women's economic transformation. Managerial and governmental accounts emphasize improvements in women's economic status, citing increased income generation, employment opportunities, and leadership roles within BE sectors, such as women serving as accountants in fisheries committees. Conversely, the qualitative data gathered through in-depth-interviews and FGDs with women in coastal communities indicate different lived experiences. This narrative aligns with the top-down approach to development; where macro-level indicators are often prioritized over the lived experiences of individuals (Scott & Storper, 2003).

The assertion that women "… have been empowered and have the ability to express different opinions at the level of various development committees" suggests a progress in women's political participation and agency. The mention of women's networks facilitating knowledge exchange and mutual support further underscores

a positive narrative of empowerment. However, this optimistic view immediately contrasts with the realities expressed by the women themselves.

The statement that "… the lives of many women who do seaside activities are still poor" directly contradicts the official narrative. The metrics used by government officials—such as increased income and employment numbers—fail to capture the qualitative dimensions of women's empowerment. While a woman may have a new source of income, these numbers often obscure deeper issues of agency, autonomy, and vulnerability. For instance, an increase in income does not necessarily mean a woman has control over how that money is spent; or that she is free from the financial volatility caused by climate change or market instability. Proper empowerment, as a qualitative measure, is reflected in a woman's freedom to make independent decisions, her ability to exercise control over her resources, and her sense of security and resilience against external shocks. Therefore, this disconnect between the two narratives highlights that, while quantitative indicators may suggest progress, they can mask the ongoing complex challenges that women face in transforming their lives in a meaningful and sustainable way.

This suggests the importance of incorporating bottom-up perspectives, and recognizing the diversity of experiences within any given population (Chambers, 1992). Research findings illustrate significant challenges facing women in Zanzibar's BE. Women report ongoing issues with climate change impacts, such as 'rotting seaweed,' and market instability, highlighting their livelihood vulnerability. The 'rotting seaweed' likely refers to the 'ice-ice' disease, exacerbated by warming waters; emphasizing the need for targeted climate adaptation strategies. Furthermore, women lack meaningful participation in decision-making, as evidenced by their exclusion during seaweed planting discussions. One woman in Paje provided powerful narrative to this disconnect, stating:

> "*…bei hadi tupangiwe, tunashindwa kupata fursa ya kueleza hasa namna ya ugumu wa kazi yenyewe ya kupanda mwani hadi kuuvuna ilivyo ili angalau ipangwe bei inayoendana na nguvu pamoja na muda tuliowekeza kuanzia upandaji hadi kufikia kuuvuna*."
>
> [… the pricing is imposed upon us. We lack the opportunity to properly articulate the true difficulty of the labour involved in planting and harvesting the seaweed, which prevents the setting of a price that adequately reflects the effort and time invested from cultivation to harvesting.]

This reinforces the importance of participatory development (Narayan, 2000). Additionally, conflicts over resource use are evident, as women accused fishermen of disrupting their seaweed cultivation by using 'unacceptable methods'. This accusation, seemingly contradictory given the collaborative nature of seaweed farming, suggests potential tensions arising from competing resource access and usage. It implies that while men and women may collaborate in certain aspects of seaweed farming, external fishing activities can still disrupt the cultivation process. This underscores the need for effective resource management strategies that address these competing interests, and protect women's livelihoods.

To bridge the gap between office narratives and lived realities, targeted actions are essential. These include:

(a) Implementing participatory research and monitoring frameworks that centre on women's voices, ensuring their experiences directly inform policy and program development.
(b) Developing and deploying climate change adaptation strategies that address women's specific vulnerabilities, such as providing access to climate-resilient seaweed varieties, and diversifying income streams.
(c) Incorporating women into decision-making processes by establishing formal mechanisms for their participation in BE development; guaranteeing that their concerns are addressed.
(d) Instituting conflict resolution mechanisms that effectively resolve resource use disputes, thereby safeguarding the livelihoods of marginalized groups, including women.

6. Discussion on Women's Inclusion in Zanzibar's BE

The discussion begins by acknowledging the increasing efforts to address women's exclusion, but emphasizes the need to critically assess the effectiveness of current strategies and initiatives. While programs designed to maximize women's inclusion are in place, they are often counteracted by structural challenges, including the lack of women in key decision-making positions. As Francis and Graber (2023) point out, many key white-collar government positions, which could directly address the challenges faced by women at lower levels, are still predominantly occupied by men. This lack of female representation in influential roles hinders the development and implementation of gender-sensitive policies and programs. They further suggest that in workplaces where women may struggle to assert themselves, men often readily assume control, further marginalizing women's voices and perspectives. This dynamic limits the profound impact of BE initiatives on women's outcomes (ibid.). The findings of this study also reveal a lack of proper coordination in the implementation of BE objectives. Discussions with government officers revealed barriers related to women's capacity to serve as focal points for women's issues within the BE. Limited long- and medium-term training opportunities that provide technical capacity further contribute to women's exclusion from development.

The women's inclusion approach adopted by the BE in Zanzibar aims to promote women's development, but simply increasing the number of women involved does not guarantee equal participation. As per Francis and Graber (2023), and other studies from developing countries illustrate, Zanzibari cultural norms often restrict women's public visibility and participation. This highlights the limitations of a purely quantitative approach to inclusion, and the need to address underlying socio-cultural constraints.

Similarly, increasing women's representation in management positions—such as in fishing committees where women are often selected as accountants—is insufficient on its own to ensure their voices are heard, and their concerns are addressed. The

selection process for such positions may favour elite women or those connected to influential figures, which can create the false assumption that these select women represent all women. However, such a scenario can exacerbate existing inequalities, widen the gap between different groups of women, and further exclude marginalized women (Currell, 2024). This phenomenon of 'gender tokenism' only creates an illusion of inclusion, without shifting the underlying power structures (Cooke, 2023). The predominant focus on outreach and capacity building, through planned training, may be a weakness if it lacks genuine co-creation. Instead, the outreach approach should involve local women from the initial stages of implementation. Co-creation and mutual understanding between local women and government officers are needed to build positive women's inclusion. This is best achieved through specific strategies like participatory action research; where local women are not just research subjects, but active co-investigators who define the problems and propose solutions. Another effective method is to adopt a community-led development model, which places decision-making and resource management directly in the hands of the community. This not only builds capacity, but also fosters genuine ownership and long-term sustainability. However, the lack of inclusion of women in the BE has been found to be systemic in regional and national coastal policy instruments in developing nations (Lawless et al., 2021; Mangubhai, et al., 2022).

Achieving meaningful women's inclusion requires an organizational and institutional change. This necessitates that BE sectors adopt a transformative approach that critically examines women's attitudes, beliefs, practices, and power dynamics among themselves, government offices, and other stakeholders (Minnaar, 2022). Reforming the normative structures and processes of institutions is considered fundamental to reducing women's exclusion (Gupta, 2020). Given that women's inclusion is often viewed as a global principle enforced in a top-down manner, spaces need to be created for local management and individuals to contest and negotiate what women's inclusion truly means in BE initiatives and practices.

7. The Role of Funding and Structural Challenges

Nussbaum's (2000) capabilities approach provides a suitable framework for understanding the importance of women's inclusion in the BE. She argues that development should be assessed by the extent to which individuals can achieve central human capabilities (ibid.). In the context of the BE, this means that simply including women in economic activities is insufficient: development requires an expansion of their capabilities. Economic capabilities are essential; requiring equitable access to resources, markets, and employment. Hence, addressing inequalities in access to seaweed grounds, processing facilities, and tourism benefits is vital. Building upon the work of Llanos et al. (2025), Zanzibar must prioritize women's financial inclusion through decision-making mechanisms, such as microfinance and cooperatives, to mitigate the impacts of gendered labour divisions and care work. Political capabilities are equally crucial, demanding women's robust voice in decision-making. Kotze and Bohler-Muller (2024) emphasize participatory governance for sustainable development. In Zanzibar, this translates to ensuring women's active involvement in designing, planning, and

executing policy. Social capabilities for women, including education and training, are vital for empowerment; aligning with Nussbaum's emphasis, and the challenges highlighted in the Peruvian case studies.

Furthermore, transparency and accountability in governance are indispensable. Governance structures must be transparent and accountable to all stakeholders, including women, ensuring their concerns are addressed. As Österblom et al. (2020) highlight, the importance of transparent governance for equitable resource management in Zanzibar necessitates promoting participatory decision-making, ensuring access to information, and establishing mechanisms for accountability. The disconnect between policy and practice, as observed by Bennett et al. (2024), underscores the need for robust governance frameworks that prioritize transparency and inclusivity.

The of focus of the Zanzibar government on integrating women into the BE, particularly within fisheries and aquaculture, represents a crucial step towards inclusive and sustainable development. However, a critical analysis reveals that while progress has been made, significant challenges still persist, demanding a more holistic approach.

Government and donor-funded initiatives—including investments in seaweed processing facilities, provision of loans, and efforts to strengthen value chain linkages—demonstrate a commitment to enhancing women's economic participation. The allocation of TZS36.5bn from the IMF Covid-19 Recovery Fund underscores the scale of these investments. However, a critical question arises regarding the appropriateness of such large-scale external funding, when fundamental issues like widespread low literacy and limited access to capital for all women remain unaddressed. As evidenced by the experiences with the seaweed carts, there is a risk that these substantial funds could perpetuate the same top-down and non-participatory issues if they prioritize large-scale infrastructure and pre-determined projects over bottom-up and context-specific interventions that empower women. The focus on big-ticket investments, such as those enabled by the IMF fund, can sometimes overshadow the need to address the basic everyday challenges that prevent women from fully benefiting from these initiatives. This can result in a development model where money is spent, but genuine and equitable empowerment remains elusive.

Despite these efforts, several critical challenges impede the full realization of women's potential in the BE. A fundamental barrier is the limited literacy and numeracy skills of many women. The women's own words affectingly express this: *"..Sisi hatujasoma sana, hatujui kusoma wala kuandika vizuri….tunapotaka kupatiwa pesa au malipo lazima tuandikiwe maombi ya fedha hiyo*".. [We didn't study much, we don't even know how to write well... so we have to have our money requests be written for us]. This highlights how this deficiency not only hinders their access to financial services, as they struggle with loan applications and other documentation, but also limits their ability to effectively manage their businesses and participate in more complex value chain activities.

Education correlates with women's economic empowerment (World Bank, 2023). However, loans or equipment alone are insufficient due to structural barriers like limited market access and social norms. Women have historically engaged in trade via traditional financial exchanges, demonstrating inherent capacity. Integrating formal support with these practices is crucial for overcoming constraints and enabling full participation in the BE (Lichna et al., 2023).

7.1 Socio-cultural Barriers and the Need for a Holistic Approach

The text also highlights the significant impact of socio-cultural norms on women's economic opportunities. The criticism of focusing on "… activities that require great strength – seaweed value chain and loan application" due to social-cultural reasons indicates that traditional gender roles often restrict women's participation in certain economic activities. The example of women being "… prevented from drying seaweed in front of hotels" due to tourism development, further illustrates how economic development can sometimes exacerbate existing inequalities. The quote from a woman in Tumbe *shehia* is quite illustrative: "*We women, with our traditions and customs, are not able to go to anchovy processing, all those things for us are done by men… it is humiliating ourselves."* This powerfully articulates how deeply ingrained cultural norms can limit women's economic agency, and reinforce gender hierarchies (Narayan, 1997).

7.2 Sociocultural Barriers and the Need for a Holistic Approach

Sociocultural barriers significantly impact women's economic opportunities, underscoring the necessity of a holistic approach to development (Chambers, 1992). Traditionally, prescribed gender roles restrict women's participation in activities that require substantial physical strength or high public visibility. The criticism that development efforts focus on high-labo0r activities—such as certain stages of the seaweed value chain and loan applications—illustrates how cultural norms can impose economic limitations. Furthermore, customary practices restrict women's involvement in open areas, especially in front of men. For instance, women were prevented from drying and processing anchovy along the coast due to the perception that 'women are too good to work in the open areas, particularly in front of men.' This confirms that economic development activities, when mediated by community culture, can exacerbate existing inequalities. Research indicates that these constraints create clear non-financial barriers that impede access to opportunities despite economic capacity. This necessitates a comprehensive approach that addresses not only economic issues, but also the social norms actively resisting empowerment (Narayan, 2000).

In conclusion, the findings reveal a significant gap between the expansive, macro-economic aspirations of the BE and the on-the-ground realities of women producers in Zanzibar. While initiatives have successfully enhanced women's roles in financial management and processing, these gains remain fundamentally compromised by structural deficiencies, particularly the exclusion of primary producers from critical decision-making processes like price setting and resource

allocation. Overcoming these vulnerabilities requires moving beyond symbolic participation and addressing the institutional structures that perpetuate the top-down approach. Future policy must mandate the co-creation of governance mechanisms and value-chain protocols that formally incorporate women's expertise and labour value. Only through this substantive inclusion—where local actors dictate the terms of their engagement and development—can the BE transition from a model of resource extraction focused on macro-growth, to one of legitimate, equitable, and sustainable local development.

Beyond enhancing support intervention efficacy, equitable market access and pricing mechanisms are essential to ensure fair remuneration and information parity for women producers. It is also essential to recognize and value women's labour by developing methodologies to better measure and recognize women's contributions to the BE, including their unpaid work in post-harvest processing and household food security. Equitable resource access, and the dismantling of socio-cultural barriers, are paramount. Policies must guarantee women's equal resource access, while community engagement is crucial to challenge restrictive gender norms, and promote women's transformation.

8. Conclusion

Women's inclusion in the BE is still in its early stages. Achieving a meaningful inclusion is complex; requiring a decisive shift from a focus on quantitative inclusion to a qualitative and transformative change. The fundamental challenge lies in bridging the significant disconnect between macro-level policy and funding—often driven by large external investments—and the micro-level realities of structural and socio-cultural exclusion experienced by women on the ground. To successfully navigate this transition, improved guidelines, targeted training, and hands-on activities are necessary; with a priority on benchmarking acceptable practices for women, and the process of their inclusion. Governments and their sectors must develop innovative ways to promote, facilitate, and reward efforts that integrate women's perspectives across all BE actors and development stages. Such concerted steps can facilitate the transition from women-inclusive approaches being 'new', to becoming the 'norm' in policy and practice. By adopting key lessons from women's inclusion and development theory, BE officers and local communities must diversify their approaches to directly address the underlying norms, relations, and power structures that shape women's marginalization, equipping stakeholders with tools that go beyond only reaching women, to actual building their capacities and transforming their livelihoods in locally and culturally acceptable ways.

8.1 Fostering Participation and Leadership

Moving beyond simply increasing the number of women involved in leadership requires a crucial shift towards fostering proactive participation and leadership. This necessitates prioritizing qualitative indicators that measure women's actual influence in decision-making processes, their equitable access to resources and benefits, and their proven ability to shape policy and program design. Establishing structured

mechanisms for ongoing dialogue and feedback with women at all levels—from grassroots communities to leadership positions—is essential. These mechanisms must be designed to create safe spaces for women to express their concerns and priorities without fear of reprisal or social stigma, an indispensable element for notable empowerment. Furthermore, investing in targeted leadership training and mentorship programs specifically designed for women in the BE will empower them to effectively advocate for their needs, confidently participate in decision-making, and assume critical leadership roles within their communities and organizations.

8.2 Addressing Challenges Related to Socio-Cultural Norms

Recognizing that socio-cultural norms play a highly significant role in limiting women's participation, and addressing these root causes, is paramount for transformative change. This requires engaging in gender-sensitive community dialogues with a broad range of stakeholders; including traditional and religious leaders, men, and women themselves. These dialogues should aim to proactively challenge restrictive gender norms, promote a more equitable understanding of women's roles in the BE, and foster a supportive environment for women's empowerment. Complementing these discussions with culturally appropriate communication strategies, utilizing effective local channels and messaging: these will raise awareness about women's rights, and the long-term benefits of their full participation. Crucially, supporting and strengthening existing women's organizations and networks, while facilitating the formation of new ones, is key. Providing these organizations with resources and capacity-building opportunities will empower them to effectively advocate for their members' interests; and contribute to a broader and sustained social change.

8.3 The Imperative of Coordinated and Integrated Governance

Effective women's inclusion demands a coordinated and integrated approach across different government sectors and policy domains, moving past the current fragmentation. Establishing a dedicated coordinating body for women's inclusion in the BE—with representatives from relevant ministries, government agencies, and civil society organizations—is crucial to ensure effective coordination, and unified integration of gender perspectives across all BE sectors, preventing fragmented and duplicative efforts. Furthermore, mainstreaming gender into all BE policies, strategies, and programs is essential. This means explicitly integrating gender equality and women's empowerment objectives into every policy framework, program design, and implementation process. To ensure accountability and accurately track progress, developing robust gender-sensitive indicators and monitoring frameworks is non-negotiable. These indicators must measure not only the quantitative aspects of women's participation, but also the qualitative dimensions of their empowerment; such as their decision-making power, control over resources, and overall well-being.

8.4 Critical Next Steps for Policy and Research

Moving forward, a critical next step for policy and research is to pilot a project to develop and implement gender-sensitive monitoring and evaluation (M&E)

indicators for BE initiatives. This would involve a participatory action research (PAR) approach, where researchers and local women co-design metrics that capture not only quantifiable economic gains, but also qualitative improvements in women's agency, autonomy, and social standing. Simultaneously, a parallel pilot project could test community-led and co-management models for key marine resources—such as seaweed farms or fishing grounds—with an explicit focus on ensuring that women have equal decision-making authority and control over resources. The findings from this dual-pronged and evidence-based approach will provide the necessary foundation for policymakers to move decisively beyond simple inclusion, to fostering equitable and sustainable development.

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