ReSea

Our Ocean, Our Future,

For Everyone

A Gender Strategy for Locally Managed Marine Areas (LMMAs) in the Western Indian Ocean



A Practical Guide for Communities, Committees and Champions

mission inclusion

IUCN GDW Great Blue Wall

In partnership with Canada

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ACRONYMS

General	**AU**	African Union
	BMU	Beach Management Unit
	CSO	Civil Society Organization
	FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
	GBV	Gender-Based Violence
	GESI	Gender Equality and Social Inclusion
	IUCN	International Union for Conservation of Nature
	LMMA	Locally Managed Marine Area
	NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
	NbS	Nature-based Solutions
	PSEA	Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse
	SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
	UN	United Nations
	WIOMSA	Western Indian Ocean Marine Science Association
Kenya	**KNAP-GE**	Kenya National Action Plan on Gender Equality
	NPfGD	National Policy for Gender and Development (2019)
	NFAP	National Fisheries and Aquaculture Policy (2020)
Tanzania	**NGP**	National Gender Policy (2023)
	NFP	National Fisheries Policy (2015)
	BEF	Blue Economy Framework (2021)
Mozambique	**NESG**	National Strategy for Gender and Development (2016)
	LVD	Law on Domestic Violence (2009)
	GEL	Gender Equality Law (2018)
Madagascar	**PNG**	Politique Nationale du Genre / National Gender Policy (2019)
	NAP-GBV	National Action Plan on Gender-Based Violence
	PNPA	Politique Nationale de la Pêche et de l'Aquaculture / National Fisheries and Aquaculture Policy
Comoros	**NGES**	National Gender Equality Strategy (2020)
	BEP	Blue Economy Plan
Regional/ International	**GBW**	Great Blue Wall
	SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals

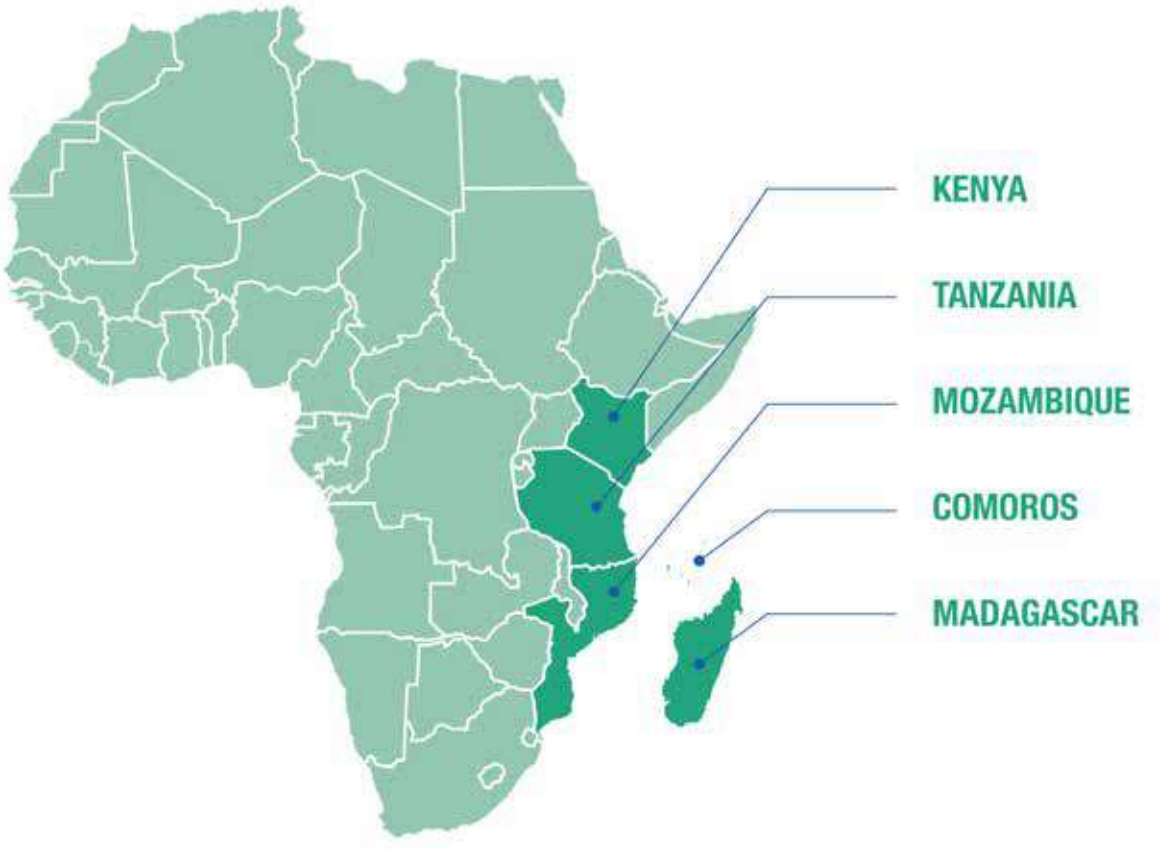


EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This Gender Strategy for Locally Managed Marine Areas (LMMAs) in the Western Indian Ocean (WIO) provides a practical roadmap to strengthen equity and inclusion across governance, livelihoods and conservation. It is intended for LMMA committees, community organizations, government agencies, women's and youth groups, private sector NGOs and donors working in coastal and marine resource governance.

Over the past two decades, LMMAs have expanded rapidly across the WIO, with more than 62 sites established since 2000 covering approximately 11,329 km² (Rocliffe et al., 2014). These areas have demonstrated measurable ecological and livelihood benefits. Yet, women, youth and marginalized groups remain under-represented in governance, decision-making and benefit-sharing. This invisibility undermines both social justice and the long-term resilience of marine and coastal systems.

Western Indian Ocean Locally Managed Marine Area (WIO LMMA) Alliance





1. INTRODUCTION

Locally Managed Marine Areas (LMMAs) have emerged as a vital community-driven approach to marine conservation and sustainable livelihoods across the Western Indian Ocean (WIO). Since the year 2000, more than 62 LMMAs have been established, covering over 11,000 km² of coastal and marine habitats. These initiatives have demonstrated measurable ecological benefits, including recovery of fish stocks and coral reefs, while also contributing to food security and local economies. However, despite their success, LMMAs continue to reflect and reinforce deep-seated gender inequalities that limit their full potential for social and ecological resilience.

Women, youth and marginalized groups remain significantly underrepresented in LMMA governance, decision-making and benefit-sharing. Existing power structures, socio-cultural norms, and economic barriers often confine women to low-return, informal roles while excluding them from leadership and resource control. These inequities not only undermine social justice but also compromise the legitimacy, compliance and long-term sustainability of marine conservation efforts.

This Gender Strategy responds to this gap by providing a practical, evidence-based roadmap to transform LMMAs into inclusive, equitable and gender-responsive governance systems. Grounded in regional case studies and participatory research from Kenya, Tanzania, Mozambique, Madagascar and Comoros, the strategy outlines five interconnected objectives aimed at:

1. Strengthening inclusive governance structures,
2. Promoting gender-transformative livelihoods and blue economy opportunities,
3. Addressing unpaid care work and restrictive social norms,
4. Preventing and responding to gender-based violence
5. Building institutional capacity and fostering strategic partnerships.

By integrating gender equality and social inclusion into the core of LMMA design and implementation, this strategy seeks to align local marine management with global commitments including the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 5 and SDG 14), the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework, and CEDAW while ensuring that conservation outcomes are both ecologically sound and socially just.

This document is intended for use by LMMA committees, community organizations, government agencies, women's and youth groups, NGOs, donors and all stakeholders committed to advancing equitable and sustainable marine governance in the Western Indian Ocean. Together, we can reimagine LMMAs as spaces where diversity is valued, participation is meaningful and both people and ecosystems thrive.



SDGs 5 and 14

1.1 Importance of LMMAs in coastal and marine conservation

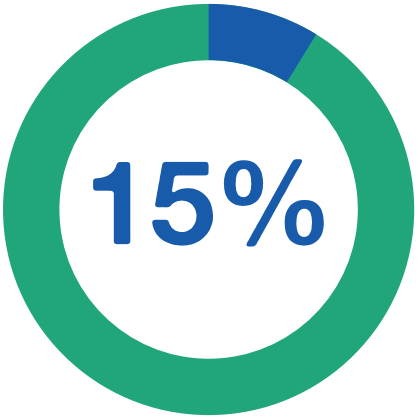
Locally Managed Marine Areas (LMMAs) are vital community-driven conservation initiatives that balance ecological protection with local livelihoods in the Western Indian Ocean (WIO). Since 2000, more than 62 LMMAs covering over 11,000 km² have been established (Rocliffe et al., 2014). They contribute directly to sustaining biodiversity, protecting coral reefs and enhancing fish stocks. For example, Kenya's Kuruwitu LMMA and Tanzania's community-managed reefs in Tanga have recorded improved fish biomass and coral recovery, demonstrating that community-based rules can reverse degradation and sustain marine ecosystems.

Beyond conservation, LMMAs are central to strengthening food security and livelihoods. In Madagascar's Velondriake LMMA, temporary octopus closures led to a 400% increase in catch and income (Blue Ventures, 2014), while in Mozambique's Quirimbas Archipelago, LMMA-linked eco-tourism and sustainable seaweed farming provide income for women and youth. In the Comoros, community participation in Moheli Marine Park has boosted reef fish populations, supporting nutrition and household economies. These examples illustrate that when communities lead, conservation translates into tangible socio-economic benefits.

1.2 LMMAs and natural-resource governance and community livelihoods

Locally Managed Marine Areas (LMMAs) sit at the intersection of natural-resource governance and community livelihoods, where gender and social norms determine who uses, manages and benefits from coastal resources. Across the Western Indian Ocean (WIO) Kenya, Tanzania, Mozambique, Madagascar, and Comoros women, youth and marginalized groups often carry heavy care and subsistence burdens, face limited decision-making power, and encounter legal, cultural, and economic barriers to equitable participation. For example, the ReSea GBA+ analysis (2023) found that women make up less than 15% of LMMA governance bodies, with leadership roles

overwhelmingly dominated by men. In Kilifi County (Kenya), 41% of women were involved in LMMA establishment compared to 55% of men, but women's participation drops sharply as processes advance: only 13% were engaged in actual decision-making. These dynamics reflect entrenched power imbalances that shape whose voices are heard, whose knowledge is valued and who controls benefits within LMMA systems.



the ReSea GBA+ analysis (2023) found that women make up less than 15% of LMMA governance bodies, with leadership roles overwhelmingly dominated by men

At the same time, strong entry points exist for change. Women's cooperatives, savings and credit groups and community-based organizations have emerged as important pathways for women's influence in coastal resource management. In Mozambique's Quirimbas Archipelago, women's seaweed farming groups generate significant household income but remain excluded from LMMA planning and licensing processes. In Madagascar, studies from Velondriake LMMA show that women dominate gleaning and post-harvest fish processing (over 70% participation), yet tenure and gear rights remain concentrated among men. In Comoros, cultural norms still limit women's visibility in fisheries governance, but new community-based aquaculture and eco-tourism initiatives are increasingly recognizing women's contributions as central to livelihood resilience. Tanzania's LMMA networks (notably in Tanga) have begun experimenting with gender-sensitive meeting schedules and quotas, but women still report harassment in male-dominated fishing zones and lack access to credit to scale their enterprises.

Evidence shows that when LMMAs embed gender-transformative practices, both conservation and social outcomes improve. Where women's leadership is intentionally built, institutional cultures shift, and inclusive practices are mainstreamed such as childcare provision, women-only training sessions, flexible scheduling, and targeted access to finance and markets compliance with conservation rules increases, and household resilience strengthens. For example, in Madagascar's Belo-sur-Mer LMMA, women-led mangrove restoration groups have improved seedling survival rates while generating income from carbon credits and eco-tourism. In Kenya's Kuruwitu LMMA, women's participation in eco-tourism and seaweed processing has created new revenue streams while reducing destructive fishing pressure. These cases illustrate how targeted support combined with structural reforms such as quotas, inclusive bylaws, safeguarding policies, and tenure formalization can transform LMMAs from gender-blind models into gender-responsive systems that deliver durable, socially just conservation outcomes.

1.3 Why Gender matters in LMMAs

Marine resource use and governance in the Western Indian Ocean (WIO) are deeply gendered, with women, men, youth and persons with disabilities performing different but interconnected roles across fisheries and coastal economies. Women are central in post-harvest processing, small-scale trade, reef gleaning, aquaculture and household food security, while men more often dominate offshore fishing and decision-making spaces such as LMMA committees, Beach Management Units (BMUs) and fisheries cooperatives. This division of labor creates structural inequalities: women typically have less access to assets such as boats, gear, finance, and tenure rights. Recent gender-based analyses (ReSea Project, 2024) confirm that women make up less than 15% of LMMA governance bodies across the region yet they are rarely in leadership roles and remain concentrated in undervalued post-harvest activities. Similarly, youth and persons living with disabilities despite their active roles in restoration, aquaculture, and trade are largely absent from governance structures.



Some of the activities from different groups.

In addition to economic exclusions, women and youth carry the largest burden of unpaid care work, which limits their ability to attend governance meetings or training opportunities. In Mozambique, fisherwomen often juggle fish processing and childcare, leading to their exclusion from forums that meet during peak household labor times (WWF, 2019). Women also face heightened risks of gender-based violence (GBV) and harassment at landing sites, as documented in Kenya and Madagascar, where transactional sex has been linked to access to fish (Guard & Masaiganah, 1997; Baker-Médard, 2023). In the Comoros, socio-cultural norms continue to restrict women's leadership, leaving fisheries cooperatives male-dominated despite women's active roles in gleaning and market sales.

These exclusions not only affect women and youth individually, they also weaken LMMA institutions. When women, youth and other marginalized groups are absent, LMMA committees lose vital knowledge, perspectives and leadership that improve legitimacy and compliance. Evidence from the Velondriake LMMA in Madagascar shows that targeted outreach and social-marketing interventions raised women's participation in governance, which in turn improved compliance with octopus fishery closures and boosted catches by over 400% (Blue Ventures, 2014). In Kenya's Kuruwitu LMMA, women's seaweed farming groups have diversified incomes while enhancing marine stewardship. In Tanzania's Tanga reefs, youth-led eco-tourism and conservation education initiatives have strengthened community support for marine protection. Across the WIO, when women's cooperatives, youth associations and savings groups are meaningfully engaged, LMMA outcomes are stronger: rules are respected, value chains are diversified and resilience increases.

1.4 Linking Gender and Nature-Based Solutions

Locally Managed Marine Areas (LMMAs) represent a community-driven form of Nature-based Solutions (NbS) that protect, restore and sustainably manage ecosystems while addressing pressing social challenges. When designed to be gender-responsive, LMMAs move beyond participation to become gender-transformative, tackling structural inequalities and shifting power relations in coastal governance. This ensures that biodiversity conservation is not achieved at the expense of equity but instead actively advances inclusion and justice.

By strengthening the role of women, youth and marginalized groups in LMMA decision-making, governance systems can draw on a wider pool of knowledge and leadership. Women's contributions from reef gleaning practices and post-harvest innovations to indigenous stewardship traditions bring critical insights that are often overlooked in formal governance. Incorporating these perspectives enhances ecological outcomes, improves compliance with conservation rules, and builds legitimacy within communities. In this way, LMMAs demonstrate how NbS can integrate social equity with environmental stewardship to deliver more durable results.

Positioning LMMAs as gender-responsive NbS also reinforces broader governance commitments at national, regional and global levels. Linking gender equity with NbS directly supports Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 5 on gender equality and SDG 14 on life below water), aligns with the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework and fulfills obligations under the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). As such, inclusive LMMAs not only strengthen marine ecosystems but also contribute to advancing justice, accountability, and sustainable governance across the Western Indian Ocean.





2. REGIONAL GENDER CONTEXT (WESTERN INDIAN OCEAN (WIO) CASE STUDY)

The five barriers limiting women's full and meaningful participation in LMMA governance play out in distinct ways across the five WIO countries, shaped by different historical trajectories, policy environments, and local social dynamics. Looking across this variation helps to show both the depth of the challenge and where there may be practical entry points for change.

2.1 Kenya

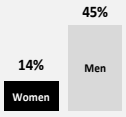
Kenya possesses one of the most progressive legal and policy frameworks for gender equality in natural resource governance in the region. Its 2010 Constitution enshrines the "two-thirds gender rule" (Article 27), requiring that no more than two-thirds of elective or appointive positions be held by one gender. This principle has also been extended into fisheries governance through BMUs, which bring together fishers, fish traders, boat owners and other local stakeholders to co-manage fisheries resources at landing sites. The Fisheries (Beach Management Unit) Regulations require that BMU executive committees meet gender balance requirements and allocate leadership seats across different categories to support more diverse representation. At the national level, the National Policy on Gender and Development (2019) and the National Fisheries Policy (2020) both emphasize the inclusion of women and youth in the blue economy and equitable benefit-sharing in marine resource management. Yet despite this enabling legal environment, implementation on the coast still lags significantly behind policy ambition. Women remain concentrated in post-harvest roles such as fish smoking, drying and trading, often operating with limited capital, weak bargaining power and minimal presence in formal management forums (Matsue et al., 2024). At the same time, there are important openings for change, particularly at county level. In places such as Kilifi, local efforts to support women's participation in BMUs, savings groups and value-added enterprises suggest that more inclusive governance is possible, and examples such as Bamburi BMU show that women can take on leadership roles and help shift local practice (Matsue et al., 2024; Rohe et al., 2018).

Recent GBA+ findings from the ReSea project show that these broader dynamics remain clearly visible in Kilifi Kenya. Women report much lower levels of knowledge of marine governance mechanisms than men: only 14% of women could explain what an MPA is, compared with 45% of men, while 64% of women reported no knowledge of MPAs at all. Similar gaps appear in relation to LMMAs, where only 15% of women could explain the concept, compared with 39% of men, and 68% reported no knowledge of LMMAs. Participation also remains uneven. In LMMA establishment, 41% of women reported participation compared with 55% of men; while many women were consulted at earlier stages (47%), only 13% reported full engagement in decision-making. These patterns are echoed in household and economic decision-making: 36% of women reported involvement in all household financial decisions, compared with 48% of men, and although 43% of women reported being consulted on economic decisions, only 15% felt they could make such decisions independently, compared with 26% of men. Economic inequalities are equally marked. In Kilifi, 28% of women reported incomes below a basic quality of life, compared with 20% of men, 25% said they consistently struggled to cover expenses, and 64% relied on informal employment. Women also reported lower business profitability, with 25% describing their businesses as not profitable at all, compared with 12% of men, and lower confidence in running a business, with only 17% feeling completely confident, compared with 28% of men. Their participation in the blue economy also remains more constrained: only 29% of women reported the blue economy as their main source of income, compared with 46% of men, and 60% reported little to no understanding of sustainable practices, compared with 26% of men. Women further reported higher levels of economic loss linked to extreme weather events (55% vs. 46%). Taken together, these findings suggest that in Kenya women's participation in marine governance is present, but still too often concentrated at the levels of consultation and lower-return economic activity rather than sustained influence, leadership and equitable access to more resilient blue economy opportunities.

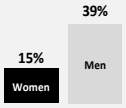


Kenya

Knowledge/Awareness



A higher proportion of men (45%) than women (14%) demonstrated awareness and understanding of MPAs, indicating gendered disparities in access to information, exposure and engagement opportunities.



Men (39%) reported greater understanding of LMMAs compared to women (15%), suggesting potential barriers affecting women's access to marine governance knowledge and related information systems.

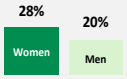
Participation/Influence



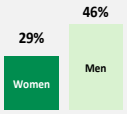
13%

13% of women reported meaningful participation in decision-making processes, highlighting persistent gender gaps in influence, representation and voice within governance and community structures.

Economic position/Resilience

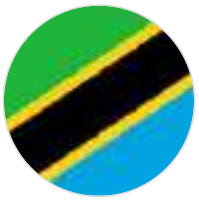


Number who reported incomes below a basic quality of life



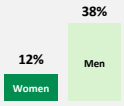
A greater proportion of men (46%) than women (29%) reported the blue economy as their primary source of income, indicating gender differences in livelihood opportunities, access to productive resources and labour participation.

2.2 Tanzania

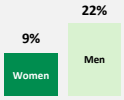


Tanzania

Knowledge/Awareness



Knowledge of Marine Protected Areas (MPAs): Men (38%) demonstrated higher awareness and understanding of MPAs compared to women (12%), indicating gendered disparities in access to information, exposure, and participation in marine governance learning spaces.



Knowledge of Locally Managed Marine Areas (LMMAs): Men (22%) reported greater understanding of LMMAs than women (9%), suggesting unequal access to knowledge, capacity strengthening, and engagement opportunities related to community marine management systems.

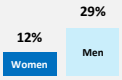
Participation/Influence



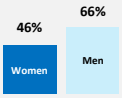
10%

Participation and influence in decision-making: 10% of respondents reported meaningful participation in decision-making processes, highlighting limited inclusion, agency and influence in governance structures, particularly for women and marginalized groups.

Economic position/Resilience



Men (29%) were more likely than women (12%) to perceive their livelihoods as economically sustainable, suggesting gendered disparities in economic security, resilience and access to sustainable livelihood opportunities.



Blue Economy graph1 Men (66%) were more likely than women (46%) to report the blue economy as their primary source of income, reflecting gendered differences in livelihood participation, economic opportunities, and access to productive resources.

Tanzania's policy environment provides several important footholds for advancing gender equality in fisheries and marine governance. The Women and Gender Development Policy (2000, revised 2023) and the National Fisheries Policy (2015) both recognize women's contributions to small-scale fisheries, while the National Plan of Action for Small-Scale Fisheries (NPOA-SSF, 2021) explicitly commits to reducing gender-based barriers and promoting more equitable participation. The BMU Guidelines, which require at least 30% of BMU executive committee members to be women, also set an important institutional precedent for inclusive governance (FAO, 2020). Yet these policy advances sit alongside persistent gender imbalances on the ground. Women make up a substantial share of the fisheries workforce in Tanzania, largely in lower-return and undervalued post-harvest roles, while governance spaces such as BMUs and LMMA structures remain overwhelmingly male-dominated (FAO, 2020; de la Torre-Castro et al., 2017). At the same time, there are signs of progress through institutional reforms and grassroots organizing, including the work of the Fisheries Gender Desk and organizations such as TAWFA, which have helped strengthen women's access to finance, training and leadership opportunities (FAO, 2020).

Recent GBA+ findings from the ReSea project show that these broader patterns remain clearly visible in Tanga and Pemba in Tanzania. Women report much lower levels of knowledge of marine governance mechanisms than men: only 12% of women could explain what an MPA is, compared with 38% of men, and 66% of women reported no knowledge of MPAs at all. A similar gap appears in relation to LMMAs, where only 9% of women could explain the concept, compared with 22% of men, and 69% reported no knowledge of LMMAs. Participation presents a more mixed picture. In MPAs, 30% of women reported participation in establishment activities, but none reported full engagement in decision-making. In LMMAs, women's participation appears stronger overall, with 50% reporting participation, 70% involved at the collaboration stage, and 10% reporting full engagement in decision-making, though authority clearly remains limited. These constraints are echoed in household and

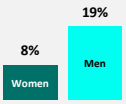
economic decision-making: 45% of women reported involvement in all household financial decisions, compared with 71% of men, and only 9% of women reported complete autonomy in economic decision-making, compared with 14% of men. Economic inequalities are equally pronounced. Only 12% of women viewed their livelihoods as economically sustainable, compared with 29% of men; 46% of women identified the blue economy as their main source of income, compared with 66% of men; and women remain far less present in higher-return sectors such as fishing and aquaculture (18% vs. 79%), while being more concentrated in less lucrative activities such as coastal agriculture (46%). Women also appear more exposed to climate-related economic disruption, with 71% reporting moderate to high losses from extreme weather events, compared with 62% of men. Taken together, these findings suggest that in Tanzania women's participation in marine governance is often present at the level of collaboration, but still rarely translates into equal authority, economic autonomy or access to more profitable blue economy opportunities.

2.3 Mozambique



Mozambique

Knowledge/Awareness



Men (19%) demonstrated higher understanding of LMMAs compared to women (8%), indicating gendered disparities in access to marine governance information, awareness-building opportunities and participation in knowledge systems related to local resource management.

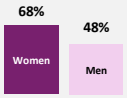
Participation/Influence



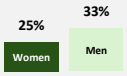
16%

16% of women reported participation in LMMA establishment activities, while none reported meaningful engagement in decision-making processes, highlighting significant gender gaps in participation, voice, representation and influence within marine governance structures.

Economic position/Resilience



Women (68%) were more likely than men (48%) to report their businesses as unprofitable or only marginally profitable, pointing to gendered barriers to business sustainability, profitability, access to capital, markets and economic resilience.



Men (33%) were more likely to then women (25%) to report the blue economy as their primary source of income, suggesting gendered differences in livelihood participation, access to economic opportunities and productive assets within marine and coastal economies.

Mozambique's governance framework provides important entry points for gender equality, although implementation remains uneven in practice. The Constitution (2004) guarantees equal rights for women and men, while the Fisheries Law (2013) and the Gender Policy and Strategy (2018) emphasize women's inclusion in fisheries, aquaculture and coastal resource management. Mozambique is also a signatory to broader international frameworks such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the Food Agriculture Organisation (FAO) Small Scale Fisheries (SSF) Guidelines, which promote more inclusive and equitable small-scale fisheries governance. At the same time, women's labour remains central to the fisheries economy, particularly in fish processing and trade, yet this economic importance has not translated into equal presence in governance. Men continue to dominate offshore

fishing, gear ownership and leadership positions, while women face persistent barriers linked to social norms, insecure tenure, restricted access to finance and care responsibilities. Mozambique also highlights the urgency of treating Gender Based Violence (GBV) as a governance issue: documented "fish-for-sex" practices along the northern coast illustrate how unsafe and unequal working conditions can directly undermine women's agency, dignity and participation in marine governance. Yet there are also promising openings, including women-led cooperatives in aquaculture and fish processing, and pilot efforts to test more gender-responsive approaches in fisheries governance.

Recent GBA+ findings from the ReSea project show how these structural inequalities play out in everyday governance, decision-making and livelihoods. In Inhambanne, Mozambique, women report lower levels of detailed knowledge of marine governance mechanisms, with only 8% able to explain what an LMMA is compared with 19% of men, and women's participation in LMMA activities remains particularly low (17%). A similar pattern appears in MPAs, where only 16% of women reported participating in establishment activities, compared with 30% of men, and none reported full engagement in decision-making. Women also express lower confidence in their ability to apply their knowledge in relation to MPAs and LMMAs. These disparities extend into household and economic decision-making: 57% of women reported being involved in all household financial decisions, compared with 78% of men, while only 17% of women felt able to make significant economic decisions independently, compared with 26% of men. Economic vulnerability is also pronounced. A much higher proportion of female entrepreneurs described their businesses as unprofitable or only marginally profitable (68% vs. 46%), only 25% of women reported the blue economy as their main source of income (vs. 33% of men), and 69% of women reported no or poor understanding of sustainable practices in the use of coastal and marine resources. Women also appear slightly more vulnerable to severe climate-related losses, with 33% reporting losses above 50% from extreme weather events, compared with 28% of men. Taken together, these findings suggest that in Mozambique women's contributions to marine and coastal livelihoods remain substantial, but their access to knowledge, decision-making power and more secure blue economy opportunities remains sharply constrained.

2.4 Madagascar

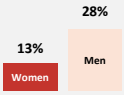
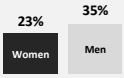
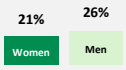
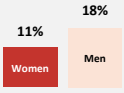
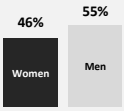
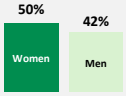
Madagascar stands out as a regional pioneer in LMMA development, supported by a relatively strong enabling environment for community-based marine governance through frameworks such as the National Environmental Charter (1990), the National Policy on Gender and Development (2000) and the Fisheries and Aquaculture Law (2015). The country now hosts more than 200 locally managed sites covering over 17% of its nearshore waters, making it one of the most significant examples of community-based marine conservation in the region (Gardner et al., 2020). National commitments to gender equality are further anchored in Madagascar's ratification of CEDAW and its alignment with the African Union's Agenda 2063. The Velondriake LMMA in southwest Madagascar has become a globally recognized model, generating strong evidence of both ecological and socioeconomic benefits: temporary octopus closures have been shown to increase catches by over 400%, delivering rapid and tangible gains to participating households (Blue Ventures, 2014; Oliver et al., 2015). Research also suggests that targeted outreach, social marketing and measures such as women's representation quotas and tailored capacity-building can increase women's participation in governance and improve compliance with fishery closures (Gardner et al., 2020).

In Diego, Madagascar, GBA+ findings reveal persistent gender gaps in knowledge, participation and economic influence across both MPAs and LMMAs. Women are less likely than men to understand marine governance mechanisms, with fewer able to explain what an MPA (13% vs. 28%) or an LMMA (11% vs. 18%) is, and a much larger share of women reporting no knowledge of LMMAs at all (67%). Women's participation is also more limited: only 23% of women, compared with 35% of men, reported participating in the establishment of MPAs, while in

LMMAs women's overall participation remains slightly lower (46% vs. 55%) and none reported full engagement in decision-making roles, despite many being involved in collaborative activities. This constrained participation is mirrored in the economic sphere. Although women report substantial involvement in household financial decisions (69% vs. 62% of men), they are less likely to be regularly consulted on broader economic decisions (9% vs. 24%) and less likely to make economic decisions autonomously (40% vs. 49%). Livelihood patterns also remain strongly gendered: men are more concentrated in fishing and aquaculture (89% vs. 39%), while women are more present in marine and coastal tourism (43% vs. 0%). At the same time, women report lower confidence in the economic sustainability of their livelihoods (21% vs. 26%), and many remain excluded from nature-based value chains altogether (50% vs. 42%). Taken together, these findings suggest that in Madagascar women's participation in coastal and marine governance is present, but not yet consolidated into leadership, decision-making power or equitable access to resilient blue economy opportunities.



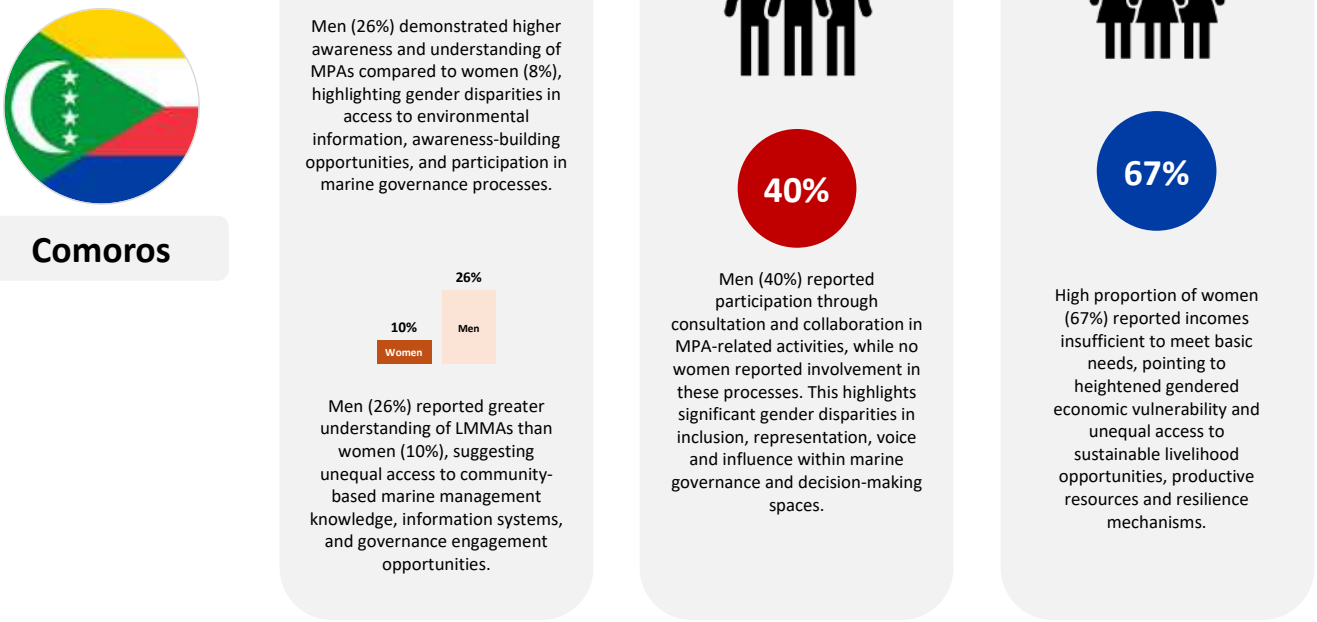
Madagascar

Knowledge/Awareness	Participation/Influence	Economic position/Resilience
 Men (28%) demonstrated higher awareness and understanding of MPAs compared to women (13%), suggesting gendered disparities in access to environmental information, awareness-building opportunities and engagement in marine governance processes.	 Men (35%) reported higher participation in the establishment of MPAs than women (23%), pointing to gendered differences in opportunities for engagement, representation and influence in conservation governance.	 Men (26%) were slightly more likely than women (21%) to express confidence in the economic sustainability of their livelihoods, suggesting gendered differences in economic security, resilience and access to sustainable livelihood opportunities.
 Men (18%) reported greater understanding of LMMAs than women (11%), indicating potential gender gaps in access to community resource management knowledge and participation in local governance and information systems.	 Men (55%) reported higher participation in LMMAs than women (46%). However, no women reported meaningful engagement in decision-making roles, highlighting persistent barriers to women's voice, leadership, and influence despite participation in implementation or community processes.	 Women (50%) were more likely than men (42%) to report exclusion from nature-based value chains, indicating structural barriers limiting women's access to economic opportunities, productive assets, market participation and livelihood diversification.

2.5 Comoros

The Union of Comoros has laid important policy foundations for gender equality and inclusive fisheries governance. The Constitution (2001) enshrines equality before the law, while the National Gender Policy (2011) emphasizes women's participation in governance and economic development. At the sectoral level, the Fisheries and Aquaculture Law (2014) and the National Strategy for the Blue Economy (2019) recognize, at least in principle, the role of community-led management and women's participation in sustainable marine resource governance. Yet these enabling frameworks coexist with highly restrictive socio-cultural norms around women's public participation. In practice, women remain central to coastal gleaning, processing and small-scale trade, but their roles are still undervalued and their voice remains limited in formal governance spaces. This gap between policy commitments and lived reality continues to shape how marine governance is experienced in the Comoros.

Recent GBA+ findings from the ReSea project in Mohéli reflect these tensions clearly. Women show lower levels of awareness of marine governance mechanisms than men: only 8% of women could explain what an MPA is, compared with 26% of men, while 39% of women reported not knowing what an MPA is at all. A similar pattern appears for LMMAs, with 10% of women able to explain the concept compared with 26% of men. These knowledge gaps are linked not only to gender, but also to broader inequalities, including education and exclusion from information flows. Participation also remains highly uneven. While all surveyed women reported being informed about MPA activities, none reported being consulted or involved in planning, whereas 40% of men reported both consultation and collaboration. This limited participation is mirrored in decision-making and economic life: more women than men reported no involvement at all in financial decision-making (10% vs. 3%), only 28% of women felt they had strong influence over economic decisions, and 67% reported incomes too low to meet basic needs. Taken together, these findings suggest that in the Comoros, women's presence in coastal livelihoods remains significant, but their influence over marine governance, economic decisions and more profitable blue economy opportunities remains sharply constrained by structural and social barriers.



2.6 Regional

Across the Western Indian Ocean, these persistent barriers for women coexist with a significant and timely window of opportunity for change. Blue economy agendas are expanding across the region, bringing renewed attention to coastal livelihoods, marine governance and equitable benefit-sharing. At the same time, growing recognition of the importance of small-scale fisheries, decentralization reforms that create space for more locally grounded governance, and the emergence of women-led collective action in coastal communities all provide important entry points for transformation. These dynamics are further reinforced by increasing donor and policy attention to gender equality, social inclusion and ocean justice within conservation and climate resilience agendas. Taken together, these shifts create a strategic moment to move beyond gender-blind LMMA models and to embed more inclusive, accountable and gender-transformative approaches within the next generation of marine governance in the WIO.



3. GENDERED BARRIERS AND OPPORTUNITIES IN LMMA GOVERNANCE

Understanding why women remain marginalized in LMMA governance requires moving beyond simplistic explanations of "cultural tradition" or "lack of interest" to examine the multiple intersecting and mutually reinforcing barriers that structure women's lives and opportunities within coastal communities. These barriers operate across interconnected economic, political, social and institutional domains and, taken together, can be understood as a gendered architecture of exclusion. Drawing on feminist political ecology frameworks (Elmhirst, 2011) and recent empirical research from the WIO, we analyze these barriers across five key dimensions.

3.1 Gendered barriers

There are five main barriers that continue to limit women's full and meaningful participation in LMMA governance. These include unequal access to resources, exclusion from decision-making spaces, the burden of unpaid care work, gender-based violence and restrictive socio-cultural norms. These barriers are interconnected and shape not only whether women are able to participate, but also the extent to which their roles, knowledge, and contributions are recognized and supported within LMMA governance processes.



Unequal access to resources



Exclusion from decision-making spaces



The burden of unpaid care work



Gender-based violence



Restrictive socio-cultural norms

Barrier	Description (What it looks like)	Analysis (Why it matters / effects on LMMA governance)
Access to resources	Women across the WIO have limited accessrights to boats, engines and high-value fishing gear, which remain predominantly owned and controlled by men. Frangoudes et al. (2019) documented that men dominate offshore fishing while women are concentrated in near-shore gleaning, seaweed farming and post-harvest activities such as fish processing, smoking and trading. De la Torre-Castro et al. (2017) found that in Zanzibar, women are systematically excluded from formal fishing licenses and permits, which are typically issued to male boat owners, rendering their fishing activities invisible in official statistics. Women face severe constraints in accessing formal credit and financial services due to lack of collateral. They have insecure tenure rights over coastal lands and resources, leaving them vulnerable to displacement. In Kenya, Wamukota (2010) and Gideon (2023) documented that women play crucial roles in fish processing and marketing, buying fish from fishers, cleaning, preserving through drying or pre-cooking, packaging and branding before selling to consumers yet these activities remain informal and undervalued.	This restricts women's ability to benefit from marine resources or move into higher-value activities. Kleiber et al. (2015) noted that women's fishing activities are often left uncounted, rendering them invisible in the official data that shapes policy and investment decisions across the WIO. This invisibility perpetuates a cycle of neglect and marginalisation, excluding women from recognition, benefit-sharing, and support. It also weakens resilience to climate-related pressures, as women often have less access to climate-resilient gear, cold storage, and essential infrastructure. As a result, they are pushed into the most vulnerable and precarious segments of the value chain, where they have little control over pricing or profit
Exclusion from Decision-Making Spaces	LMMA committees, Beach Management Unit (BMU) executive boards, fisheries cooperatives and community conservation councils across the WIO are overwhelmingly male-dominated spaces with most of them chaired by men. The ReSea GBA+ assessment found that across multiple countries, women's representation on these bodies averages less than 15%, with even lower percentages in leadership positions such as chair, secretary, or treasurer (ReSea Project, 2024). When women are present, their participation is often tokenistic: they may be invited as observers rather than full voting members; seated but not heard, their contributions dismissed or ignored, assigned stereotypical roles rather than engaging in substantive decision-making about resource allocation, rule enforcement or benefit distribution (Cornwall, 2016). In some cases, women report that male colleagues actively undermine their participation through subtle behaviors like interrupting them during meetings, holding pre-meetings to which they are not invited or making decisions in informal spaces, beachfront bars, fishing vessels, men's social gatherings from which women are culturally excluded.	Women's perspectives are regularly excluded from rules and planning within LMMA communities in the WIO, resulting in governance outcomes that ignore women's needs. Closure periods may be set during times that conflict with women's gleaning or trading activities, access zones may be designated that exclude the near-shore areas where women harvest, benefit-sharing arrangements may channel resources to eco-tourism revenue, development projects, training opportunities and toward male-dominated activities while neglecting women's enterprises (Rohe et al., 2018). Tokenistic participation undermines the legitimacy of LMMA institutions and perpetuates the cycle of exclusion.

Barrier	Description (What it looks like)	Analysis (Why it matters / effects on LMMA governance)
Unpaid Care Work and Time poverty	Women bear primary responsibility for childcare, care of the elderly and sick, food preparation, water and fuelwood collection, and household maintenance. GBA+ findings from the ReSea project indicate that women in coastal Kenya and Madagascar dedicate between 20 and 30 hours per week to these unpaid activities—significantly more than men, whose contributions average fewer than 10 hours weekly (ReSea Project, 2024). This unequal division of labor creates time poverty, leaving women with little discretionary time for meetings, training or leadership activities. LMMA committee meetings are typically scheduled during daytime hours, precisely when women are engaged in childcare, food preparation or income-generating activities. Meetings are often held in central locations, requiring travel time women cannot afford, and may extend for hours, making attendance difficult or impossible. Training programs, leadership workshops and exchange visits—critical pathways for building skills and confidence—are similarly inaccessible to women constrained by care responsibilities.	Time poverty is a structural constraint on women's public participation. Because LMMA meetings, trainings and exchange visits are often scheduled without regard to care responsibilities, women are less able to attend consistently, engage fully or sustain leadership roles. Even when they can physically attend, they often arrive already fatigued by unpaid domestic and care work, limiting their ability to participate meaningfully. This temporal dimension of exclusion is rarely acknowledged in conservation planning, yet it is central to understanding persistent gender gaps in leadership.
Gender-Based Violence (GBV)	The phenomenon of "sex-for-fish", where women fish traders are coerced into transactional sex with male fishers or boat owners to secure access to catch, has been documented across the region. Early research in Tanzania documented the prevalence of this practice, finding that women traders faced systematic sexual exploitation as a condition of doing business. Further work has traced how these dynamics persist and evolve, with women reporting that refusal to comply results in exclusion from markets, verbal abuse and social ostracism (Baker-Médard, 2023). In Mozambique, similar patterns have been documented along the northern coast, where women fish processors report that sexual advances from male fishers are commonly normalised as part of their working environment. A recent ReSea assessment (2025) in Pangani(Tanzania), reveals how climate change exacerbates these dynamics, as fish stocks decline, reports have emerged of women being asked for sexual favors in exchange for access to dwindling catches.	This creates unsafe environments that deter women from participating or speaking out. The absence of safe, trusted reporting mechanisms within LMMA structures compounds these risks. Women who experience violence or harassment have nowhere to turn to or report, LMMA committees lack codes of conduct, grievance procedures or connections to Gender Based Violence (GBV) service providers. Fear of loss of income, social exclusion, and further violence keeps women silent. This silence allows harmful behaviour to continue unchecked, sending the message that it is tolerated and that women who experience it have little support or recourse. Over time, this can undermine trust and weaken committee cohesion. In Kilifi, the integration of gender-sensitive grievance mechanisms into BMU bylaws has already begun under pilot initiatives supported by partners such as ReSea. Strengthening and scaling such measures can provide practical pathways for redress.

Barrier	Description (What it looks like)	Analysis (Why it matters / effects on LMMA governance)
Restrictive socio-cultural norms	Across the WIO, patriarchal ideologies construct men as "natural" decision-makers, public actors and household heads, while positioning women as domestic, subordinate and lacking the authority to speak on matters of community concern. These norms are not static traditions but actively maintained and reproduced through everyday practices, institutional arrangements and discourses about culture and community. In many coastal communities, women's presence in public meetings is itself stigmatized. Women who attend LMMA meetings may be accused of neglecting their domestic duties, seeking inappropriate visibility, or challenging male authority. Their families, husbands, fathers, in-laws may actively discourage their participation, viewing it as a threat to household harmony or community respect. Even when women overcome these pressures to attend, they face skepticism about their competence: their knowledge is dismissed as "just women's things," their opinions treated as less valid than men's and their leadership resisted as culturally inappropriate. These norms also shape men's behavior and possibilities. Men who support women's participation may face ridicule or suspicion from their peers. Men who wish to share caregiving responsibilities may be constrained by expectations of masculine behavior.	Limits women's voice and perceived legitimacy in governance spaces. Norm-based resistance fuels backlash against quotas or women's leadership initiatives. Without deliberate norm change efforts, women's participation risks remaining symbolic, reinforcing tokenism rather than achieving substantive influence. The internalization of these norms by women themselves can also constrain participation: women may defer to male authority, doubt their own competence, or prioritize family harmony over their own engagement. Crucially, these norms create an environment where even well-intentioned institutional reforms such as gender quota may fail to produce meaningful change if the underlying cultural assumptions about who has authority to speak and decide remain unchallenged. Challenging gender inequality therefore requires not only supporting women's leadership but also engaging men in reimagining masculinity, expanding the possibilities for everyone's lives, and creating community-wide dialogue about the costs of restrictive norms and the benefits of more equitable arrangements.

Key gendered barriers to inclusive LMMA governance in the Western Indian Ocean

These barriers are mutually reinforcing and help explain why women remain underrepresented in and overlooked by environmental management institutions across the WIO, despite their deep involvement in marine fisheries and sustainable management (Rakotondrazafy et al., 2023). Responding to them requires action on several fronts. This includes improving women's access to assets, tenure rights and formal recognition of their fishing activities; strengthening institutions through enforceable quotas, more inclusive meeting cultures and clear accountability mechanisms; providing support to address care burdens and time poverty; putting in place robust safeguarding systems and GBV referral pathways; and working with men and communities to challenge restrictive gender norms through dialogue and allyship. Together, these shifts are needed to make LMMA governance more inclusive, more representative and more effective in practice.

3.2 Opportunities

Opportunity	Description (What it looks like)	Analysis (Why it matters / effects on LMMA governance)
Existing women's and youth groups	Women's enterprise, cooperatives, savings and credit associations (VSLAs/SACCOs), youth associations and community-based organizations are active around fisheries and livelihoods.	These groups are trusted local structures. They can nominate representatives to LMMA committees, manage small-scale enterprises, and monitor compliance. With capacity-building and formal roles, they can shift from "beneficiaries" to recognized governance actors.
Indigenous and local knowledge	Women hold detailed knowledge on gleaning areas, tides, seasonal species availability, reef conditions, and household-level resource management.	This knowledge can strengthen LMMA ecological monitoring and early warning systems. Recognizing it increases women's legitimacy in decision-making and builds the case for their leadership in conservation planning.
Emerging blue economy initiatives	Women and youth are increasingly involved in seaweed farming, mangrove honey production, eco-tourism, aquaculture, and fish processing cooperatives.	These value chains can be structured with gender-responsive design (secure tenure, collective ownership, access to finance, market linkages). Linking them to LMMA benefit-sharing can create new roles, incomes, and decision-making power for women/youth.
Policy momentum	National and regional frameworks (e.g. Kenya's BMU quotas, Tanzania's NPOA-SSF gender targets, Mozambique's Gender Policy, AU/FAO guidelines) increasingly require gender inclusion in fisheries and marine governance.	This creates a legal and political mandate to embed quotas, gender action plans, and safeguarding mechanisms in LMMA bylaws. Can help overcome resistance by showing alignment with national commitments and donor priorities.
Shifting social norms and male champions	In some LMMA sites, local leaders, elders or male fishers are supporting women's participation (e.g. inviting them to meetings, mentoring youth leaders).	Early norm change efforts show that resistance is not universal. Mobilizing male champions, faith leaders and intergenerational dialogues can normalize women's leadership and reduce backlash to quotas or women's visibility.

Key opportunities to inclusive LMMA governance in the Western Indian Ocean

These opportunities provide strong entry points to transition from gender-blind to gender-transformative LMMA governance and form the foundation of the five strategic objectives outlined in the next section.

Gender Disparities		Opportunities
Unequal participation, representation, and influence in marine governance and decision-making structures		Women and underrepresented groups are increasingly engaged in governance processes, creating opportunities to strengthen meaningful participation, leadership, voice and decision-making power
Unequal access to information, knowledge and capacity on marine governance systems (e.g., MPAs and LMMAs), particularly for women, youth and marginalized groups		Inclusive capacity strengthening, awareness raising, peer learning and mentorship systems can improve access to governance knowledge and participation
Barriers to equitable access to resilient, sustainable and profitable blue economy opportunities, including finance, skills, markets and formalization		Strengthening equitable access to finance, markets, skills development, entrepreneurship support and formalization pathways for women and marginalized groups in the blue economy
Restrictive gender and social norms, unequal care responsibilities, limited economic autonomy and reduced influence in household and community decision-making		Social and behaviour change approaches, care-sensitive programming, financial inclusion and community leadership initiatives can strengthen agency, shared decision-making and economic empowerment
Gaps between gender-responsive and socially inclusive policies and their implementation in practice		Existing gender-responsive and inclusive legal and policy frameworks provide an entry point for advancing transformative governance, accountability and equitable participation

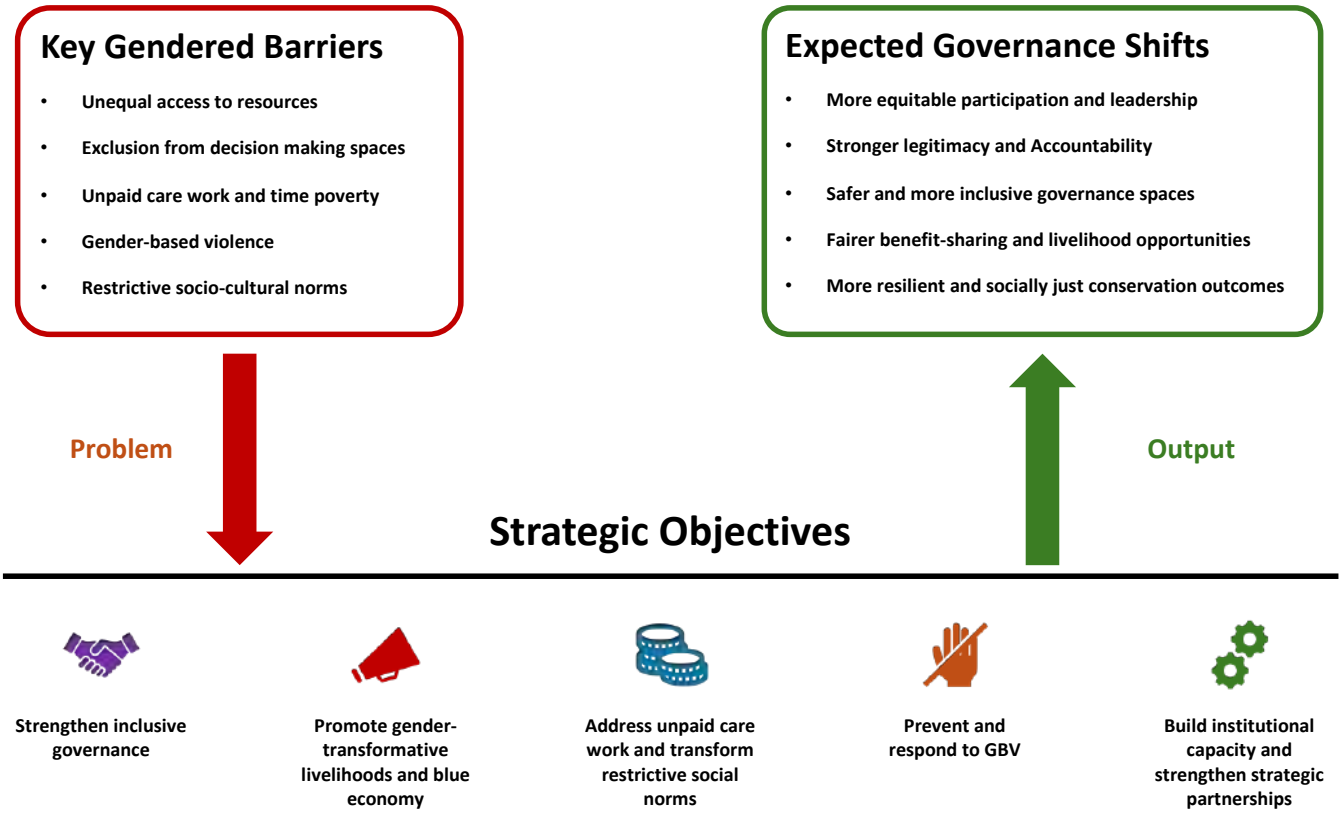
Summary of gender disparities/barriers and the associated opportunities.





4. OBJECTIVES OF THE GENDER STRATEGY

Addressing the barriers discussed requires more than simply including women in existing governance structures. It requires a gender-transformative approach that tackles unequal power relations and the norms, systems and practices that continue to shape exclusion within LMMA governance. To support more inclusive and effective outcomes in Locally Managed Marine Areas (LMMAs), this strategy sets out five interconnected objectives. As shown in Figure 1, these objectives respond to the key gendered barriers identified across the WIO and together aim to support more inclusive, legitimate and effective LMMA governance. Collectively, they focus on governance, livelihoods, social norms, protection and institutional capacity, helping to embed gender equality and social inclusion across LMMA planning and implementation.



4.1: Objective 1: Strengthen inclusive governance

Inclusive governance is the foundation of gender-responsive LMMAs. Yet women, youth and other marginalized groups remain significantly underrepresented in formal decision-making bodies such as Beach Management Units (BMUs), fisheries cooperatives and community committees. Even when present, their participation is often limited to token roles, with little real influence, reflecting entrenched structural, cultural and institutional barriers. This imbalance undermines both equity and conservation outcomes.

- First, LMMAs must strengthen the agency, leadership and influence of underrepresented groups. This requires investing in mentorship schemes, leadership development, peer-learning exchanges and other capacity-building measures that strengthen the skills, confidence and networks of women and youth leaders, enabling them to participate more meaningfully in LMMA governance.

- Second, LMMAs must reform the structures and rules that govern participation and decision-making. This includes institutionalizing gender-sensitive governance frameworks through enforceable quotas or reserved seats, revising bylaws and constitutions to explicitly promote gender equality and social inclusion, and establishing accountability mechanisms that ensure representation translates into genuine decision-making power in practice.

By advancing both individual and structural change, LMMA decision-making can become not just more representative on paper, but more genuinely inclusive in practice. When governance structures reflect the diversity of their communities, they are more likely to produce decisions that are legitimate, widely respected and effective, leading to stronger conservation compliance, fairer benefit-sharing and greater resilience of both ecosystems and livelihoods.

4.2: Objective 2: Promote gender-transformative livelihoods and blue economy

Economic empowerment is a critical lever for advancing both conservation and gender equality. Yet women, youth and other marginalized groups are often confined to low-return segments of marine value chains such as gleaning, fish smoking and small-scale trading, with limited access to finance, technology and secure tenure. At the same time, emerging blue economy sectors, including aquaculture, eco-tourism, seaweed farming and mangrove restoration, offer important opportunities for women, youth and marginalized groups to diversify livelihoods and strengthen resilience.

LMMA strategies must therefore go beyond inclusion and intentionally promote gender-transformative approaches that shift economic structures and power relations by expanding access to more equitable and resilient livelihood opportunities.

- First, this requires improving access to affordable finance, productive assets and technologies through gender-responsive credit schemes and other mechanisms that reduce structural barriers to enterprise development.

- Second, it requires strengthening market access and enterprise opportunities for women-, youth- and marginalized group-led initiatives, including through reliable market linkages and tailored technical and business training in higher-value marine and coastal sectors.

- Third, it requires supporting women's cooperatives, savings groups, youth associations and other collective platforms as vehicles for scaling climate-resilient enterprises, strengthening bargaining power and promoting fairer benefit-sharing within the blue economy.

4:3 Objective 3: Address unpaid care work and transform restrictive social norms

Persistent gendered divisions of labor, particularly women's disproportionate responsibility for unpaid care work, are a major barrier to their participation in LMMA governance and economic opportunities. GBA+ findings from the ReSea project show that in Kenya and Madagascar, women dedicate on average 20–30 hours per week to unpaid household tasks such as childcare, food preparation and water collection, compared to fewer than 10 hours per week for men (GBA+, ReSea, 2024). This heavy care burden significantly reduces the time women can devote to training, leadership roles or income-generating activities. These constraints, compounded by restrictive gender norms, reinforce cycles of exclusion and limit women's voice in decision-making across LMMAs.

LMMA strategies must therefore pursue a dual approach that reduces unpaid care burdens while simultaneously transforming restrictive social norms.

- Reducing unpaid care burdens requires practical measures that address women's time poverty and participation constraints, including more flexible scheduling of governance meetings, childcare support during LMMA activities, and investments in labor-saving infrastructure and technologies within coastal communities. It also requires recognizing unpaid care work as a structural issue shaping women's availability, mobility and public participation, rather than as a private or household matter alone.

- Transforming restrictive social norms requires engaging men, community leaders and local institutions to challenge gendered expectations around care, leadership and authority, while promoting shared responsibilities and greater support for women's public participation. Practical entry points may include community dialogues, awareness-raising processes and male allyship initiatives that help build more enabling conditions for women's leadership and participation.

By addressing both unpaid care work and restrictive norms, LMMAs can create a more enabling environment in which women's leadership and agency are recognized and valued. This can enhance women's participation in marine governance while also contributing to stronger household resilience, more inclusive community dynamics and more sustainable conservation outcomes.

4.4: Objective 4: Prevent and respond to Gender-Based Violence (GBV) and harassment

Gender-based violence (GBV), including harassment, exploitation and abuse within fisheries' value chains, poses a significant barrier to women's safe and meaningful participation in LMMA activities. Practices such as transactional "sex-for-fish," harassment at landing sites and the absence of safe grievance mechanisms create hostile environments that undermine women's rights, limit their economic opportunities, and discourage their involvement in governance processes. In Kilifi, for example, research under the ReSea GBA+ assessment highlighted cases of harassment of women fish traders at landing sites such as Mnarani and Mayungu, as well as exclusionary practices in beach management unit (BMU) leadership, where women often reported feeling unsafe or disregarded in decision-making spaces. These realities reflect broader patterns documented across coastal Kenya (FIAS, 2023; KMFRI, 2022).

To ensure that LMMAs are safe and inclusive spaces for all, safeguarding measures must be systematically embedded into all LMMA activities, governance frameworks and day-to-day operations. This requires action across three complementary areas:

- Reporting and referral pathways: establishing accessible and survivor-centred mechanisms linked to community protection networks, health services and relevant authorities.

- Training and capacity-building: equipping LMMA committees and focal points to prevent and respond to sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment (PSEAH), while applying survivor-centred approaches grounded in confidentiality, safety and respect.

- Codes of conduct and accountability: adopting and enforcing clear standards that prohibit GBV and harassment, and making compliance a condition for participation in LMMA committees, cooperatives and fisheries-related value chains.

By addressing GBV risks proactively, LMMA structures can foster safer, more dignified and more inclusive environments that enable women, youth and marginalized groups to participate fully.

4.5: Objective 5: Build institutional capacity and strengthen strategic partnerships

Embedding gender equality and social inclusion across LMMAs requires both strong institutional capacity and effective collaboration across actors. Many LMMA committees, partner organizations and government agencies currently lack the technical, organizational and facilitation capacities and expertise to fully integrate gender equality and social inclusion (GESI) principles into marine governance and resource management. Addressing this gap requires action on several fronts:

- Building capacity at multiple levels is therefore essential. This should include tailored GESI training for LMMA committees, community members and implementing partners, coupled with practical tools that support gender analysis, inclusive governance, safeguarding, monitoring and livelihood interventions.

- Strategic partnerships will also be key to strengthening gender-responsive LMMA governance. Closer collaboration with women's rights organisations, local civil society groups, government gender departments, research institutions, conservation actors, and blue economy stakeholders, including investors, can help align LMMA processes with national and regional gender frameworks while bringing local knowledge, practical experience, and accountability into implementation. Multi-stakeholder platforms can support this by improving coordination, shared learning, resource mobilisation, and accountability across scales. Over time, stronger partnerships, peer exchange, and targeted capacity building can help embed gender equity more consistently in LMMA governance.

Women-led groups active in coastal conservation, in particular, can play an important role in community mobilization, advocacy, social norm change and strengthening locally grounded accountability for gender-responsive governance. Over time, stronger partnerships and targeted capacity-building can help ensure that gender equality is not treated as an add-on, but becomes a sustained pillar of coastal resource governance.

4.6 Three Pillars of the Strategy

Based on the five objectives, the strategy proposes three interconnected pillars to make LMMAs more inclusive and resilient:

Pillar	Strategic Actions
Governance	Introduce quotas or transparent seat allocation; build leadership pipelines, mentorship for women, youth and persons with disabilities inclusive meeting practices.
Livelihoods and Blue Economy	Support women- and youth-led enterprises, strengthen access to finance and cooperative models, reduce time poverty through care interventions.
Conservation and Safeguards	Integrate safeguarding measures, establish GBV referral pathways, design culturally appropriate behaviour-change interventions to shift restrictive norms.





5. IMPLEMENTATION PLAN

The successful integration of gender equality and social inclusion into Local Marine Managed Areas (LMMAs) requires coordinated action across multiple actors. Implementation will be phased over short, medium and long-term, with clearly defined responsibilities, resources and tools. This plan outlines how government agencies, LMMA committees, women's and youth groups, NGO and partners can work together to deliver on the gender responsive strategic objectives.

5.1 Roles and Responsibilities



Government Institutions play a central role in providing policy direction, legal frameworks and oversight. Fisheries ministries and gender departments will guide the enforcement of LMMA,BMU,SSF and CCPs regulations, quotas and inclusive policies, while county and municipal governments will contextualize national mandates into local LMMA bylaws and action plans. Government gender desks will provide technical advice, ensure alignment with national gender policies and serve as referral points for gender-based violence (GBV) response.



LMMA committees will serve as the operational backbone for inclusive governance. They will be responsible for integrating gender quotas into their bylaws, ensuring democratic elections and creating spaces for women and youth voices. Committees will oversee day-to-day LMMA operations, monitor compliance with gender action plans and establish grievance and safeguarding mechanisms.



Women's and youth groups are key drivers of change. Their role includes mobilizing members, identifying livelihood opportunities, documenting gender-specific challenges and serving as platforms for collective advocacy. Cooperatives and savings groups will manage enterprise initiatives, strengthen women's market access, and link grassroots' voices to LMMA governance.



Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and **Civil Society Organizations (CSOs**) will provide technical expertise, capacity-building and financial support. They will facilitate gender training, livelihood development programs and safeguard awareness campaigns. NGOs also serve as neutral actors to mediate between LMMA committees and government agencies and to advocate for accountability.



Development Partners and Donors will support implementation through financing, technical assistance and knowledge-sharing platforms. Regional organizations such as the Nairobi Convention Secretariat, FAO and IUCN can facilitate exchange of good practices across the Western Indian Ocean. Partners will also help mobilize resources for scaling livelihood innovations, strengthening monitoring, and embedding gender dimensions into marine policy dialogues.

5.2 Timeline

Short-term (0–1 year)

- Conduct baseline gender assessments within LMMAs to generate sex- and age-disaggregated data on participation, livelihoods, access to resources and unpaid care work.
- Review and revise LMMA bylaws and constitutions to embed gender quotas, gender action plans, and accessible grievance and safeguarding mechanisms.
- Deliver introductory gender equality, leadership, and governance training for LMMA committees, women, and youth representatives to strengthen inclusive decision-making.
- Establish and operationalize referral pathways and adopt Codes of Conduct on GBV/PSEA, ensuring all LMMA actors are trained and accountable.

Medium-term (1–3 years)

- Strengthen women's and youth cooperatives through tailored technical and business training, improved access to finance and establishment of reliable market linkages in fisheries, aquaculture, eco-tourism and other blue enterprises.
- Pilot childcare and labor-saving innovations to reduce unpaid care burdens, document lessons learned and integrate best practices into LMMA operations.
- Monitor and evaluate quota implementation, tracking progress on women's and youth representation and their influence in governance processes.
- Scale mentorship and peer-learning programs for women and youth leaders across multiple LMMAs to enhance leadership pathways.

- Roll out community dialogues, awareness campaign and male allyship initiatives to challenge harmful gender norms and promote shared responsibility in households and governance spaces.

Long-term (3–5 years and beyond)

- Institutionalize inclusive LMMA practices by integrating gender-responsive governance frameworks into national fisheries policies, county bylaws and regional initiatives such as the Great Blue Wall.
- Forge lasting partnerships with women's rights organizations, universities, private sector and government gender departments to sustain gender-transformative livelihood programs.
- Expand and scale successful livelihood enterprises including seaweed farming, mangrove honey production and eco-tourism into regional and cross-border value chains.
- Establish a regional LMMA learning and knowledge-sharing platform to facilitate exchange of lessons, tools and innovations on gender-responsive marine governance.
- Implement longitudinal monitoring systems to track ecological, economic and social outcomes, ensuring that gender equity and conservation impact are sustained over time.

5.3 Resources Required

Resource type	Description	Potential partners/Actor leads
Human Resource	• Gender focal points embedded within LMMA committees to coordinate and monitor GESI actions. • Trained extension officers and local facilitators to lead community dialogues, awareness campaigns, and mentorship programs. • Safeguarding focal persons to oversee GBV/PSEA prevention, response, and referral pathways. • Technical experts in livelihoods, market linkages and enterprise development to strengthen women's and youth-led initiatives.	LMMA Committees, County Fisheries and Gender Departments, Women's Rights Organizations (WROs), Civil Society Partners, NGO, Community-Based Organizations (CBOs)
Financial Resource	• Dedicated budget lines within LMMA operational plans to support gender action plan activities. • Donor and partner funding for leadership training, enterprise start-up capital and childcare innovation pilots. • Co-financing from county and municipal governments to sustain inclusive livelihood projects • Establishment of revolving funds or savings and loan schemes to empower women- and youth-led cooperatives.	County Governments, Donor Agencies (e.g., IUCN, UNDP, FAO, WIOMSA), Microfinance Institutions, Cooperatives, Private Sector Actors.

Resource type	Description	Potential partners/Actor leads
Technical Resource	• Standardized training modules on gender equality, safeguarding and inclusive governance. • Participatory monitoring and evaluation tools. • Digital platforms for cooperative management, enterprise tracking and market access. • Gender-responsive planning templates for LMMA action plans and budgets. • Climate-smart technologies for aquaculture, fish processing and mangrove restoration.	IUCN ReSea Project, National Fisheries Departments, Research Institutions, ICT Partners, NGOs providing technical assistance, Blue Economy Innovation Hubs

5.4 Tools and Approaches

To ensure that gender equality is systematically embedded into LMMA implementation, several tools and approaches will be prioritized:

Mechanism	Description	Intended Outcome / Purpose	Lead Actors / Responsible Institutions
Inclusion Continuum Framework	Assess LMMA governance and practices along a spectrum from exploitative, neutral, sensitive, transformative and use the framework as a diagnostic and learning tool during annual reviews.	Enables continuous improvement by identifying where LMMA practices fall on the inclusion scale and guiding shifts toward gender-transformative governance.	LMMA Committees, IUCN, County Gender Departments, Women's Rights Organizations (WROs)
Democratic Management Practices	Promote transparent elections, inclusive committee structures, and clear accountability systems that represent the full diversity of community members.	Strengthens legitimacy, trust, and equitable participation in LMMA governance.	LMMA Committees, County Fisheries Departments, Community Elders, Civil Society Partners
Gender Quotas and Action Plans	Embed gender quotas in LMMA bylaws and develop measurable gender action plans aligned with national and county mandates on inclusion.	Institutionalizes women's and youth representation in decision-making, ensuring equality is implemented in practice.	LMMA Committees, County Governments, State Department for Blue Economy & Fisheries, Gender Focal Points

Mechanism	Description	Intended Outcome / Purpose	Lead Actors / Responsible Institutions
Safeguarding Mechanisms	Establish and enforce codes of conduct, confidential grievance systems, and referral networks to address GBV, harassment, and exploitation.	Creates safe, dignified and inclusive spaces for all LMMA participants, enhancing women's and youth engagement.	LMMA Safeguarding Focal Persons, GBV Service Providers, County Gender Offices, Local CSOs
Participatory Monitoring and Evaluation	Involve women, youth, and marginalized groups in tracking LMMA progress using sex- and age-disaggregated data (SADD), community scorecards, and participatory assessments.	Promotes shared accountability and ensures that monitoring reflects diverse perspectives and lived experiences.	LMMA Committees, IUCN Monitoring Teams, Community Representatives, Research Institutions
Capacity Development Pathways	Institutionalize ongoing mentorship, leadership exchanges, and regional learning platforms for continuous skills and knowledge development.	Builds long-term institutional capacity and sustains gender-transformative change across LMMAs.	IUCN, Ocean Hub Africa, County Training Institutions, Women's and Youth Networks, Development Partners.





6. CONCLUSION

Making LMMAs more inclusive, equitable and resilient is not separate from conservation; it is part of making conservation work. Across the Western Indian Ocean, this strategy shows that gender inequality shapes who participates in decision-making, whose knowledge is recognised, who benefits from marine resources, and who is able to engage safely. These are not marginal issues. They affect the legitimacy, effectiveness, and long-term sustainability of LMMA governance. At the same time, experience from across the region shows that more gender-responsive approaches can support stronger governance, broader participation, and more resilient coastal communities.

This proposed strategy highlights the need for practical change across governance, institutions, social norms, and accountability. More inclusive LMMA governance will require action across five objective areas: strengthening women's participation and leadership in decision-making; improving access to livelihoods, resources and economic opportunities; addressing harmful social norms and unpaid care work; establishing stronger safeguarding and protection systems; and building the institutional capacity and partnerships needed to embed gender equality in practice.

Moving forward, this agenda will require commitment from all actors involved in LMMA governance. Governments and local authorities need to turn policy commitments into practice through enforceable rules, adequate resources, and accountable institutions. LMMA committees and other community governance bodies need to create space for more meaningful participation and leadership by women, youth and marginalized groups. Women's rights organizations and local civil society groups have an especially important role to play in this process by bringing grounded knowledge, supporting collective voice and accountability, and helping ensure that gender equality is not treated as an add-on but as a core part of marine governance. Donors, conservation actors and development partners also have a responsibility to support long-term, gender-responsive and gender-transformative approaches rather than short-term inclusion efforts alone.

The priority is not only to strengthen community-based marine governance, but to make it genuinely inclusive in practice. That is what will help LMMAs become stronger, fairer, and better able to support both people and ecosystems over the long term.