

Does Women's Economic Empowerment Drive Value Creation in the Blue Economy?

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ABSTRACT

The Blue Economy plays a crucial role in Kenya's economic development, particularly in the coastal region, which is rich in maritime resources. However, persistent gender disparities have prevented the sector from reaching its full potential. Women, despite being a significant part of the workforce, face barriers to accessing resources, opportunities, and leadership roles. Empowering women in the Blue Economy is essential not just for gender equality, but for sustainable growth. This study aimed to assess the governance systems in Kenya's six coastal counties that address gender-related concerns and to explore access to credit and financial resources for businesses in the Blue Economy. Using a mixed-method approach, the research examined women's awareness of the Blue Economy, training or support available, earnings from employment, economic independence, and access to funding. The findings revealed that while women's awareness of the Blue Economy is growing, access to formal training and support remains limited. Women face difficulties in securing stable employment and achieving economic independence, with financial decision-making hindered by a lack of resources and opportunities. Access to financial resources for women in the sector remains inadequate. To address these issues, the study recommends strengthening gender-sensitive governance frameworks that include women in decision-making processes, expanding financial resources for women-led ventures, and providing targeted training to enhance women's skills in the Blue Economy. These measures are vital for promoting inclusive growth and maximizing the sector's potential.

Keywords: Women Empowerment, Blue Economy, Gender -Sensitive Governance

BACKGROUND

The coastal region of Kenya is blessed with vast maritime resources and economic potential (OECD, 2020) yet this potential has not been fully harnessed due to gender disparities. Women, despite constituting a significant part of the workforce in these sectors, have historically faced barriers to accessing resources, opportunities, and leadership roles. Empowering women in aquaculture, maritime transport, and logistics is not just a matter of gender equality; it is a strategic imperative for sustainable growth. Women have historically been underrepresented and underserved in these sectors, limiting their access to opportunities and stifling the full potential of the Blue Economy. This study aims to harness untapped talent and drive economic progress while promoting gender equity.

The Blue Economy is now explicitly recognized as a key driver of development in Africa's Agenda 2063. Countries like Kenya is leading this effort by establishing dedicated ministries or departments for the Blue Economy. However, the maritime industry in East Africa remains largely male-dominated, and the inclusion of women has been slow, with Kenya's maritime sector being no exception (Kitada & Froholdt, 2015). Research shows that women are significantly underrepresented in management, decision-making, and

operational roles compared to their male counterparts (Kitada & Froholdt, 2015). Gender inequality in Africa is often attributed to women's limited economic power and social status (Wanyeki, 2003). The challenges women face in the Blue Economy sector are a reflection of their limited involvement in its development. Okin (1999), an American liberal feminist, argues that societal structures often privilege men over women, working against feminist goals. Culture, as a shared set of practices and ideas, is meant to unite individuals into a cohesive and functional society, yet it often perpetuates gender disparities.

Statement of the Problem

Women's economic empowerment in Kenya's coastal region, particularly within the Blue Economy sector, is ensnared in a web of multifaceted challenges that obstruct their full participation, curtail opportunities, and perpetuate gender disparities. These challenges, interwoven and persistent, encompass the following critical issues: Under-representation in Economic Roles: Within the expansive canvas of the Blue Economy sector, women are conspicuously underrepresented in pivotal economic roles, such as those in aquaculture, maritime transport, and logistics. This underrepresentation relegates them to the periphery, depriving them of equitable access to income-generating opportunities and stifling their ascent into decision-making positions that shape the sector's future. Marginalization & Limited. Across the coastal counties, particularly within marginalized communities, women encounter formidable barriers that constrict their access to indispensable resources. Scarce access to land, credit, and technology, among others, form insurmountable obstacles that hinder their meaningful involvement in Blue Economy activities. These resource deficits exacerbate the struggle for economic empowerment.

Research Objectives

The objectives of this study were:

1. To establish and strengthen governance systems in the six Coastal Counties of Kenya that are responsive to gender-related concerns and issues.
2. To improve and expand access to credit and financial resources for businesses, operating within the Blue Economy sector.

The Scope

The selection of the six coastal counties for the Women Economic Empowerment is driven by a profound understanding of the unique socio-economic dynamics in each region. Kwale, Kilifi, Mombasa, Taita Taveta, and Lamu are diverse in terms of culture, resources, and economic activities. These counties are the backbone of the Blue Economy in Kenya, yet gender disparities have hindered their full potential. The rationale for this study lies in our commitment to address these disparities and leverage the strengths of these counties for inclusive growth. The coastal areas are rich in marine biodiversity, fisheries, and port infrastructure, making them pivotal in Kenya's maritime activities. However, the potential for sustainable development has been hampered by gender inequality.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The fundamental Focus of Women's Economic Empowerment and the integration of gender considerations.

By breaking down barriers, providing access to resources, and offering targeted support, we seek to uplift women in these sectors, boost their confidence, and contribute to the sustainable development of the coastal region in Kenya. Empowering women in the Blue Economy in the coastal region of Kenya is a multifaceted endeavour. It involves fostering an environment where women are not only integrated into these sectors but

also provided with the necessary resources, skills, and opportunities to thrive (Siringi, Ikutwa & Chepkemboi, 2019)

Women social & economic empowerment in the Blue Economy is critical: It aligns with the global commitment to gender equality and the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 5, which aims to achieve gender equality (Smith et al, 2020) and empower all women and girls. It is also consistent with Kenya's own development agenda, which recognizes the importance of women's contributions to the economy. Empowering women in these sectors is essential for unlocking the full potential of the Blue Economy (Bennett, Blythe, White & Campero (2020). By increasing women's participation and leadership, we can tap into a wealth of talent, diversify the workforce, and drive innovation and sustainability in aquaculture, maritime transport, and logistics.

It is a matter of social justice and human rights. It is about ensuring that women have the same opportunities as men, that they can provide for their families, and that they can participate fully in the development of their communities and nation (Kamberidou, 2020). Breaking down barriers, providing access to resources, and offering targeted support, this study seek to uplift women in these sectors, boost their confidence, and contribute to the sustainable development of the coastal region in Kenya.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a mixed-methods research design to comprehensively explore the relationship between women's economic empowerment and value creation within the Blue Economy. By combining qualitative and quantitative approaches, the study aimed to gain a holistic understanding of the dynamics at play.

Primary and secondary data was used in the assessment. Primary data was collected through structured questionnaires interview guides, focused group discussion guides and key informants' guides. Structured interviews were conducted on government representatives, development partners, vocational Training centers, women, leadership of MSMEs' and men. The observation was conducted on blue economy related enterprises and ventures. The tools were administered by a team of enumerators, and captured on kobo toolbox for ease of record and transmission. The secondary data included a thorough examination of all relevant secondary data on Women Economic Empowerment in Blue Economy.

Collected data was analyzed to identify trends, challenges, and opportunities for women in the blue economy. Quantitative data analysis was done using SPSS and presented by use of descriptive statistics while qualitative was used for thematic concepts and verbatim expressions.

Distribution of Sample women Respondents as per Counties

The sample size and locations were guided by the geographical area size as well as the population density of the counties. The information is presented in table 4.

Table 1 Sample of women respondents per county

Counties	Frequency	Percent
Kilifi	119	16
Kwale	130	17
Lamu	121	16
Mombasa	131	17
Taita Taveta	112	15
Tana River	145	19
Total	758	100

KEY FINDINGS

Awareness and knowledge in Blue Economy by women

The study sought to determine if among the women respondents were aware of the blue economy. This knowledge was necessary in crafting future intervention that would guide women participation in blue economy. Cumulative survey data across the 6 counties shows that a larger percentage of women, 56.2%, are aware of the blue economy while 43.8% are not aware of the blue economy. This is further visualized using the figure 2;

Awareness was examined as per the county of residence. The findings are presented as shown in Figure 1.

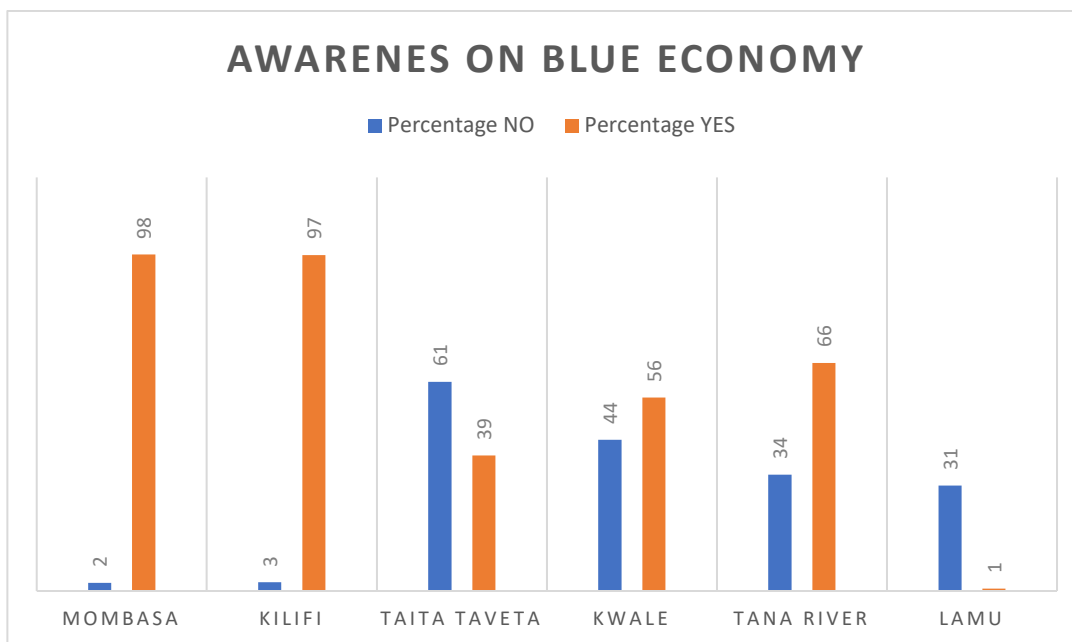


Figure 1: Awareness and knowledge on Blue Economy

From the findings, it can be seen highest numbers unawareness, 61% was established in Taita Taveta County. This could be attributed to the fact that Taita Taveta is a landlocked County, unlike Kilifi and Mombasa which have the highest awareness level at 98 % and 97% respectively due to their vast coastal land/shore with many Aquacultures, maritime transport and logistics activities.

Training or support related to Blue Economy

The other component of participation could be gauged by understanding the trainings and capacity building they might have had. Training or support related to aquaculture, was established that 67.2% of the women, who are the majority, have not received any training whereas only 32.8% have received training and support related to Blue economy.

Table 2 Training per County

County	Received Training	Frequency	Percent
Kilifi	No	118	99.2
	Yes	1	0.8
	Total	119	100

Kwale	No	108	83.1
	Yes	22	16.9
	Total	130	100
Lamu	No	68	56.2
	Yes	53	43.8
	Total	121	100
Mombasa	No	5	3.8
	Yes	126	96.2
	Total	131	100
Taita Taveta	No	90	80.4
	Yes	22	19.6
	Total	112	100
Tana River	No	120	82.8
	Yes	25	17.2
	Total	145	100

From the findings, it emerged that Kilifi County was leading in percentage, 99.2% of the women who are untrained in blue economy. The second was Kwale County, 83.1% followed by Tana River County, 82.8% and Taita Taveta, 80.4 percent.

Earning from Employment Sector Payment

Further analysis was done to establish whether women earned from their employment sector. The findings are presented as shown in Table 11.

Table 3. Payment

Earning	Frequency	Percent
Yes	499	65.8
No	259	34.2
Total	758	100.0

From the findings, it emerged that at least 65.8% of the women received payment from their employment in different sectors. The remaining percentage, 34.2% did not receive any payment.

Economic Independence

In order to establish the level of economic independence, women were asked to rate the level to which a few identified economic indicators helped them achieve economic independence.

Table 4 Blue economic activities on economic independence.

Importance of blue economic activity on economic independence	SD	D	N	A	SA
I can make financial decisions	8.1	9.5	4.9	26.6	50.9
Am able to make investment decisions	4.1	9.8	6.4	35.9	43.8
I have undertaken personal development	4.4	11.2	17.3	32.7	34.5
I don't have financial constraints	29.1	23.4	9.6	11.8	26.1

I am able to do good financial planning	13.5	16.4	16.6	16.6	36.9
I now have bargaining power	6.3	16.2	20.8	21.8	34.9

(N=591, women who engaged in blue economy activities)

Key: SD-Strongly disagree, D-Disagree, N-Neutral, A-Agree, SA-Strongly Agree

From the findings, a few important lessons were drawn in line with the questions that women responded to as indicated in the subsequent subsections.

Many respondents agreed with the notion that, should women actively participate in blue economy they will in doubt experience economic independence. In table 19, respondents gave their views on economic independence. The findings profile the different socio-economic impacts of the expansion of blue economy in the coastal region. These are presented in the subsequent sections.

According to majority, 49.9% and 11.0% of women who strongly agreed and agreed respectively, blue economy has led to economic independence among people in the coastal region. However, 28.4% disagreed while 3.7% strongly disagreed. This means that despite the positive impact, some women have not yet felt the economic independence associated with it. This means that awareness needs to be done on the importance of engaging on SMEs in blue economy sector.

Table 5 Economic independence

Importance of blue economic activity on economic independence	SD	D	N	A	SA
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Key: SD-Strongly disagree, D-Disagree, N-Neutral, A-Agree, SA-Strongly Agree

The survey also sought to determine what role the respondents, in their current employment, played in the growth of the blue economy. The responses were diverse; one was that although the respondents were participating in the Blue Economy sector, these responsibilities were primarily auxiliary since the majority of the major roles were given to men. However, the respondents felt that there was space for improvement in terms of the representation of women in important positions in the blue economy. Regarding the various roles that women played, the respondents claimed that although they had previously openly participated in some significant projects, even within these important projects, women were given ancillary responsibilities.

Financial Decisions

According to the data, 50.9% of the 591 women who participated in blue economy activities strongly agreed that they could make financial decisions, and a further 26.6% agreed, for a total approval of 77.5%. While 4.9% were neutral, 17.6% disagreed. Therefore, the blue economy is highly significant to these women and can aid in their quest for financial independence. Some people, though, are incapable of making financial decisions. This may be a result of some knowledge, training, and linkage gaps being revealed by unprofitable enterprises.

Investment Decisions

Investment decisions are very important for the sustainability of SMEs businesses. From the findings, it was established that 43.8% of women were very confident (strongly agreed) that their economic activities (blue economy) enabled them make investment decisions. On a positive note, they were supported by 33.9% who agreed on the same. However, 6.4% remained neutral (not sure), 9.8% disagreed and 4.1% strongly disagreed. Cumulatively, those who disagreed and strongly disagreed were 13.9 percent. These findings although showing a strength in the aquaculture, maritime transport and logistics SMEs activities, it also shows a gap in investment. This calls for empowerment of these women through trainings, financial support and linkage in order to strengthen them for investment decisions.

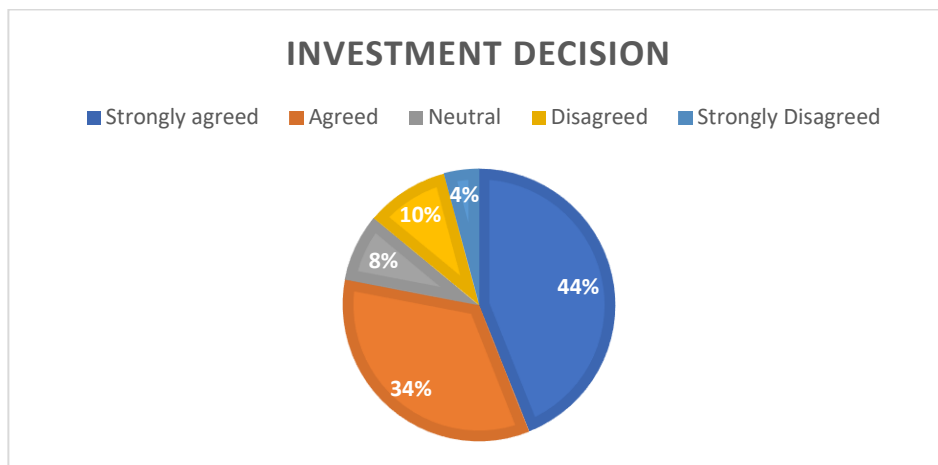


Figure 2: Investment decision

Personal Development

From the survey, it emerged that cumulatively, 67.2% of women owning or engaged in aquaculture, maritime transport and logistics have undertaken personal development. However, 15.6% (those who disagreed and strongly disagreed) shows that their business activities in this sector have not enabled them take personal development. Whereas majority have benefited, there is still a gap, which requires interventions in order to enable these women undertake personal development from blue economy sector as illustrated in figure.

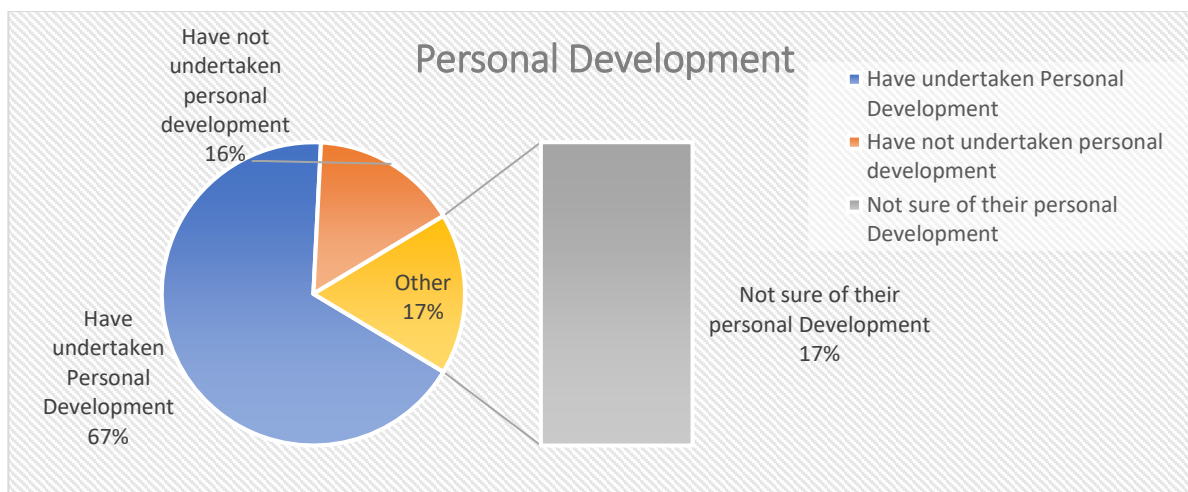


Figure 3: Personal Development

Women funding in blue Economy

From the findings, more than half of the women, 52.5% disagreed and strongly disagreed that they have inadequate funds. This means that they have financial constraints despite engaging in aquaculture and maritime sector. However, 37.9% declined having financial constraints while 9.6% remained neutral.

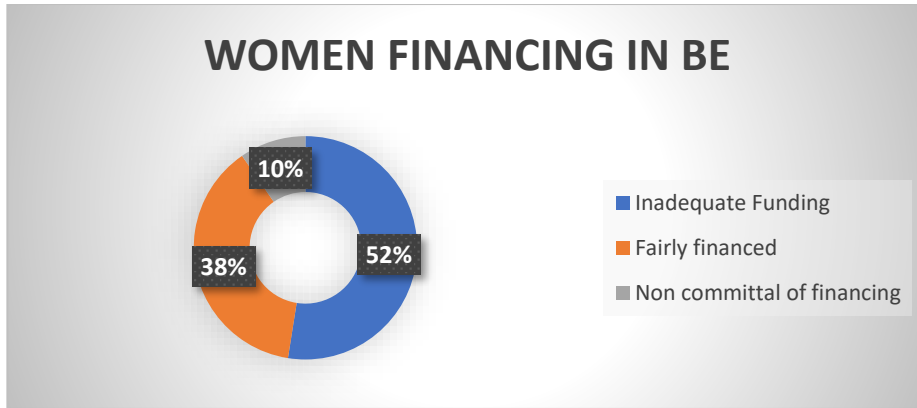


Figure 4: Women funding in BE

This is illustrated in figure 4. This means that more women in blue economy sector have financial constraints, which can be addressed through appropriate trainings and financial support on their businesses.

The challenges facing women participation in the blue economy

The study sought to establish the challenges women face or hinder their participation in blue economy. In Kenya, the gender gap in the blue economy refers to the differences and inequalities that exist in terms of women’s participation, representation, and access to opportunities. Even while the blue economy has the potential to benefit both sexes, women frequently encounter major obstacles (Muigua, 2020) that lead to unfair outcomes.

The Gender Inequality Index (GII) measures gender-based disadvantages in three areas: employment, empowerment, and reproductive health. The score illustrates the loss in potential human development brought on by the disparity between male and female accomplishment in certain areas. It ranges from zero (when women and men perform equally) to one (where one gender performs worse across all measured variables). According to the Draft Seventh Human Development Report, Kenya has a general GII of 0.651. There are regional differences, thus this isn’t true everywhere. Some counties in arid and semi-arid regions (ASALs) and coastal have high gender inequality indices.

Several challenges were cited as a hindrance of women participation in blue economy. Chief among them were culture, attitude, perceptions, stereotypes, inadequate access to capital, lack of training, few organizations championing women agenda, women absence in decision making and lack of entrepreneurial tools as presented in table 6.

Table 6 Challenges facing women in BE

STATEMENTS	1	2	3	4	5	M
Culture is an issue in the maritime sector	68(9)	110(14.5)	44(5.8)	109(14.4)	427(56.3)	3.95
Attitudes are a great impediment to advancing blue economy issues	129(17)	123(16.2)	43(5.7)	161(21.2)	302(39.8)	3.51

perceptions are a great impediment to advancing blue economy issues	144(19)	131(17.3)	65(8.6)	124(16.4)	294(38.8)	3.39
Stereotypes are a great impediment to advancing blue economy issues	128(16.9)	66(8.7)	60(7.9)	150(19.8)	354(46.7)	3.71
Inadequate access to credit to boost business	40(5.3)	67(8.8)	60(7.9)	132(17.4)	459(60.6)	4.19
Inadequate professional bodies, associations, and groups to champion women’s interest	30(4)	82(10.8)	61(8)	136(17.9)	449(59.2)	4.18
Women are being excluded from decision-making and governance roles	44(5.8)	123(16.2)	79(10.4)	126(16.6)	386(50.9)	3.91
Inadequate tools for women to move to entrepreneurial business	2(0.3)	40(5.3)	107(14.1)	86(11.3)	153(20.2)	3.92

A lot of challenges have faced women in the blue economy. The highest rated challenged by majority, 60.6% of the women inadequate access to credit to boost businesses, followed by inadequate professional bodies, associations and groups to champion women’s interests as indicated by 59.2% of them. The third was inadequate training in aquaculture, maritime transport and logistics and the fourth was culture being in the maritime sector indicated as majority, 56.3% of the women. Other challenges included exclusion of women from decision making, 50.9%, stereotype, 46.7% and attitude, 39.8 percent. A significant number of women, 14.1% were not sure whether inadequate tools hindered them.

The cultural issues identified are hinged on the way the coastal people live, where they dominantly believe in the superiority of male workers compared to their female counterparts. This is supported (Stuchtey et al, 2015). This is further illustrated by Figure 5.

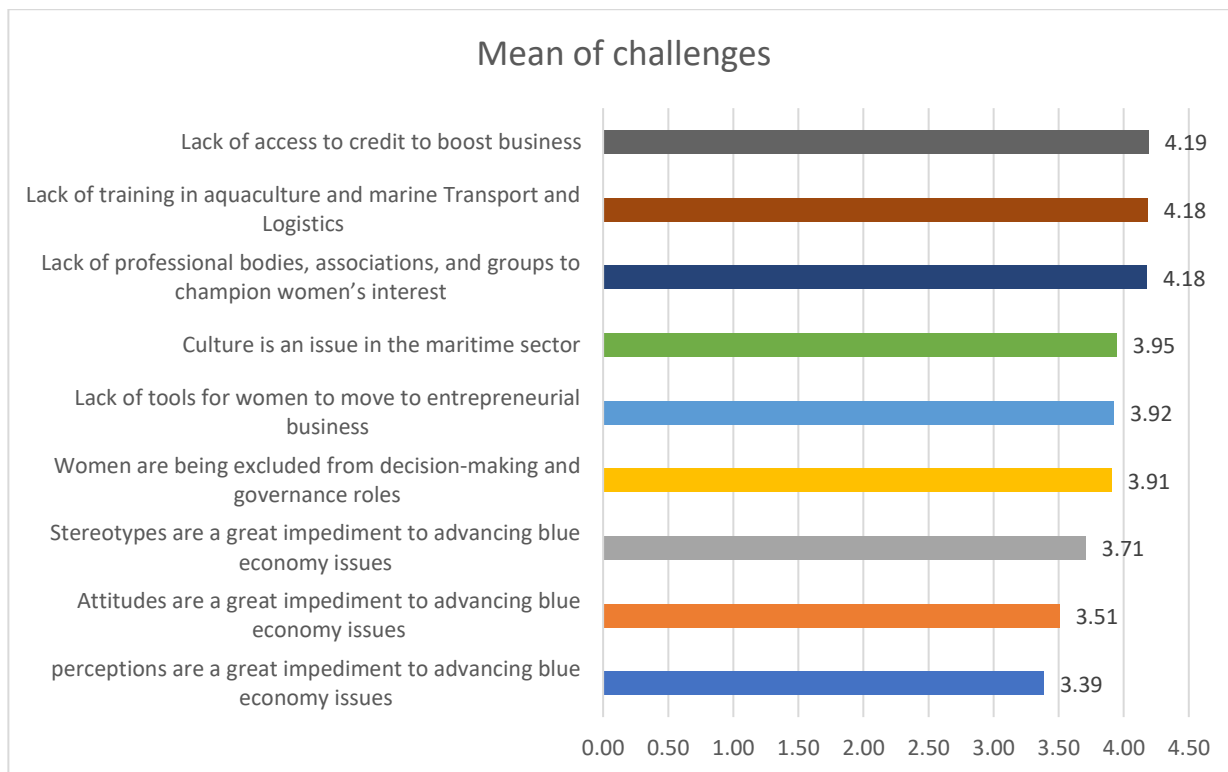


Figure 5. Challenges facing Women in Blue Economy

From the findings and results, as illustrated, the mean score of each statement is pretty high indicating higher agreement expressed by the respondents. This, therefore, indicates that the statements asked by the survey remain to be major challenges that face women engaging in blue economy activities. Overall, the table provides insights into the level of agreement with various statements related to culture, attitudes, perceptions, stereotypes, and specific challenges faced by women in the maritime sector. It appears that access to credit, lack of training, and the absence of professional bodies are seen as significant issues affecting the advancement of women in the blue economy. Additionally, the exclusion of women from decision-making roles and the lack of tools for women in entrepreneurial business are also considered important challenges.

Income Gaps between Men and Women

From the survey, 46.7% of the women engaged in blue economy activities strongly agreed that the blue economy is gradually closing the income disparity between men and women. This was also confirmed by 17.9% who agreed on the same. However, 8.0% were neutral about the statement, 24.5% disagreed and 4.7% strongly disagreed with the statement. Based on the majority, cumulatively 62.8% of the respondents who agreed and strongly agreed, it can suffice to note that there is a gradual reduction in income gaps between men and women.

Gender Inequality

It is clear from the findings by majority of the women, 48.1% who strongly agreed and 14.6% who agreed that blue economy is closing the gender inequality issues. This was however disagreed by 22.8% and strongly disagreed by 5.9% although 8.6% remained neutral. The summary findings are also presented as shown in Figure 10 below.

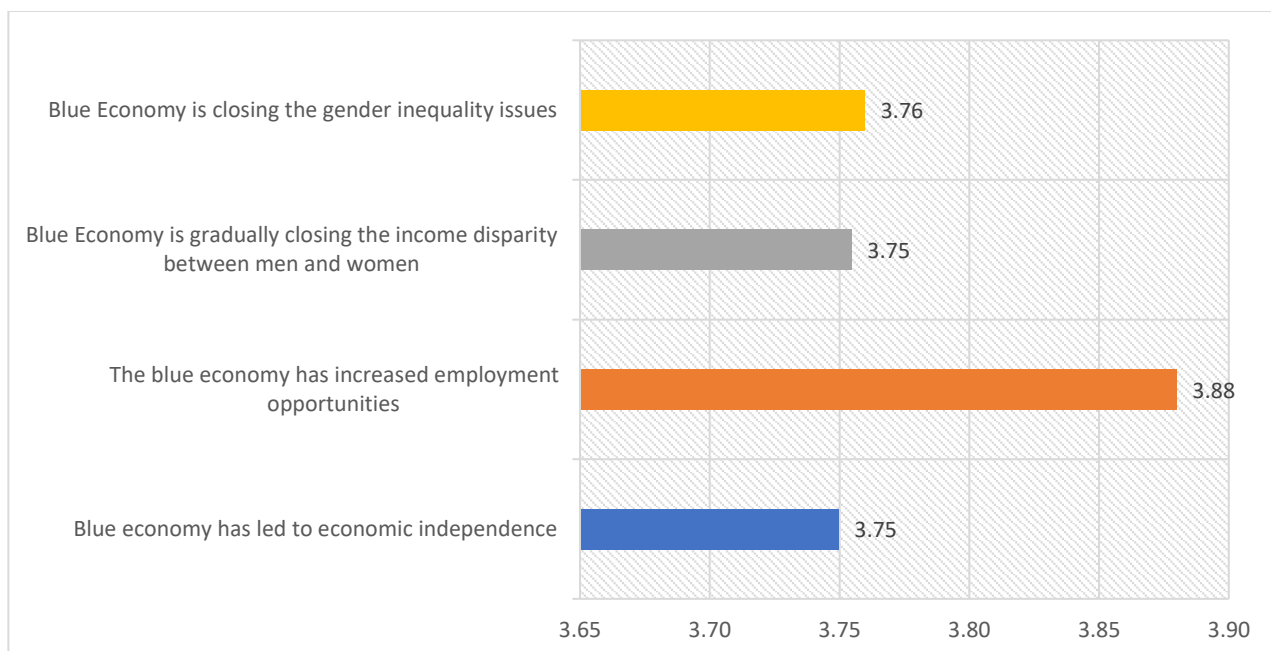


Figure 6 Gender inequality

Figure 6 shows the means response on the socio-economic impacts of blue economy expansion. From the mean distribution, the mean ranges from 3.75 to 3.88 indicating that the respondents agreed with the statements. This implies that expansion of the blue economy has a significant positive impact on the socio-economic status of the women in the coastal region as shown below:

The opportunities available to women for participation in the Blue Economy

The study also sought to understand the available opportunities that women can explore in their involvement in blue economy. From the observations and secondary data collected, several opportunities were found to exist that would enhance women participation in blue economy.

African Union’s (AU) Agenda 2063

Agenda 2063 builds on and seeks to accelerate the implementation of past and existing continental initiatives for growth and sustainable development. According to Agenda 2063, blue economy is constituted by all economic activities that emanate from Africa’s oceans, seas/seabed’s, lakes, and rivers. Examples of Blue Economy activities include: fishing, marine/lake transport/shipping, seabed mining, marine tourism, generation of tidal energy.

Employment Opportunities: It is clear from the survey findings that blue economy increases employment opportunities according to 50.6% of women who strongly agreed and 17.9% who agreed. Even though, 6.8% of the women remained neutral, 18.3% disagreed and 6.4% strongly disagreed. These findings imply that there is a positive socio-economic impact of blue economy in terms of creation of employment opportunities.

Table 7 Role of Women in the Development of Blue Economy

Role of Women in the Development of the blue economy (%)	1	2	3	4	5	Mean
women are involved in decision-making on matters of the blue economy	3.7%	19.1%	4.7%	24.4%	48.1%	4.02
Women are equally empowered on Blue Economy issues	3.9%	13.2%	6.9%	27.6%	48.4%	4.11
Women hold key management positions in blue economy organizations	3.7%	19.8%	8.6%	20.5%	47.4%	3.99
Women have formed groups in blue Economy sectors	4.2%	10.3%	4.7%	18.8%	61.9%	4.36

Key: 1= strongly disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3= Neutral, 4 = Agree and 5= strongly agree.

Involvement in Decision Making

From the findings, 48.1% of the women strongly agreed that one of the roles of women was involvement in decision-making on matters of the blue economy. This was agreed by 24.1% of the women as well. However, 4.7% were neutral about the statement 19.1% disagreed and 3.7% strongly disagreed. In overall, the percentage of those who agreed and strongly agreed was 72.5%, which is high, thus affirming that women are highly involved in decision-making on matters of the blue economy. This presents a good opportunity to negotiate and allocate resources that would eventually be realized in women empowerment.

Empowerment on Blue Economy

The ultimate goal of the baseline survey was to inform on the women empowerment strategy in blue economy. The survey therefore established from 48.4% of the respondents that women are equally empowered on blue economy issues. This was also supported by 27.6% who agreed, although 6.9% remained neutral. On the contrary, 13.2% of the respondents disagreed and 3.9% strongly disagreed. Based

on the cumulatively a high percentage, 76.0% of the women who agreed and strongly agreed, it can be concluded that women are empowered on blue economy issues.

Key Management Positions

From the findings, a cumulatively high percentage, 67.9% of women indicated that women hold key management positions in blue economy organizations. However, 8.6% remained neutral on the same, 19.8% disagreed and 3.7% strongly disagreed. Going by the majority, the survey concluded that women played a role in Key management positions in the blue economy sector.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Participation in the subsector by women will bridge gender gap, alleviate poverty and promote opportunities for MSMEs to thrive.

Conclusions

The findings indicate a diverse range of participation among women across the surveyed counties. While some counties, such as Mombasa and Kilifi, showcase higher levels of women's involvement in activities related to the blue economy, others, such as Taita Taveta and Tana River, demonstrate relatively lower levels of participation. These variations suggest the need for targeted interventions to promote inclusivity and ensure equitable opportunities for women across all coastal counties.

The survey reveals several challenges faced by women in the blue economy, including limited access to financial resources inadequate training and technical skills, inadequate infrastructure, and societal stereotypes and biases. These barriers hinder women's full participation and potential in the sector. Policymakers, stakeholders, and relevant organizations must address these challenges through targeted policies, capacity-building programs, and awareness campaigns to create an enabling environment for women to thrive in the blue economy.

The assessment established that blue economy holds great significance in women empowerment prospects. By addressing the identified challenges and leveraging the opportunities highlighted in this survey, stakeholders can work towards realizing the full potential of women's engagement in the blue economy, leading to sustainable economic development, gender equality in coastal region of Kenya.

Additionally, the survey highlights positive perceptions among women regarding the blue economy, with a majority recognizing its potential for economic growth, environmental sustainability, and empowerment. The findings emphasize the importance of raising awareness about the blue economy's benefits and promoting a supportive ecosystem that fosters women's active participation.

Key Recommendations

Skills Enhancement Programs: Prioritizing the creation and delivery of targeted training programs is essential. These programs should focus on enhancing the skillsets and knowledge base of women entrepreneurs and professionals in the Blue Economy. Topics encompass business management, financial literacy, and leadership development. **Financial Inclusion Initiatives:** Exploring avenues to improve women-led MSMEs' access to financial resources and market opportunities is critical. Establishing strategic partnerships with financial institutions and promoting inclusive lending practices can unlock growth potential. **Gender Awareness Campaigns:** Conducting gender awareness campaigns and sensitization activities is vital for challenging entrenched stereotypes and fostering a more inclusive work environment within the Blue Economy. **Networking and Mentorship:** Facilitating networking opportunities and

mentorship programs will connect women entrepreneurs with established industry professionals and mentors. These connections can accelerate their personal and professional growth.

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