



GENDER EQUITY FOR ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT IN AFRICA: THE CASE OF KENYA'S BLUE GROWTH

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Abstract:

This study assessed achieving sustainable economic development in Africa through gender equity in the maritime sector. The study was based on a case study of Kenya's Blue growth. This study is based on Feminist Economics (FE) as its theoretical framework. The study utilized mixed methods research design entailing qualitative and quantitative techniques of data gathering and analysis. The study used desk research to gather secondary data while primary data was gathered using 48 key informant interviews (KIIs). The gathered data were analyzed using content analysis. The study found that despite the significant contributions of women in Kenya's maritime sector, gender disparities continue to hinder their full economic participation. There were gaps in resource access and opportunities; income, employment, and decision-making power. Addressing these inequalities through targeted policies, enhanced financial inclusion, awareness creation, and expanded leadership opportunities were found to be crucial for unlocking the potential of women in the BE. The study concludes that achieving gender equity in Kenya's BE is essential for driving sustainable economic growth and fostering inclusive development within Africa.

Keywords: gender equity, blue economy, blue growth, economic development, kenya, africa

1. Introduction

Blue Growth is a crucial framework for leveraging ocean resources to drive sustainable economic development. Blue Growth refers to the sustainable use of marine resources to promote economic growth while ensuring the long-term health of ocean ecosystems (Eikeset *et al.*, 2018). This approach aligns with the broader Blue Economy (BE) which

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denotes the sustainable utilization of marine resources for economic growth while ensuring good health of the ocean ecosystem. Blue Economy comprises an array of maritime resources like the living resources (mangroves, capture fisheries, corals, seaweeds, aquaculture, and seagrasses), the non-living resources (marine minerals including gas, oil, and salt), trade and commerce (maritime transport, shipping, tourism, and ports) and the renewable resources (blue biotechnology, solar, tidal and wind energy).

Globally, Blue Economy is recognized as a key driver of sustainable economic development. According to McBain (2024), the sector contributes an estimated \$1.5 trillion annually to the global economy. However, gender disparities persist across Blue Economy sectors globally. Historically, women have been underrepresented in key sectors like fisheries, marine governance, and maritime trade, often relegated to lower-income and informal roles. According to UN Women (2020), women comprise nearly 50% of the global fisheries workforce, yet they are often confined to low-paying, informal, and less secure roles like fish processing and small-scale trading. Women rarely participate in decision-making, marine governance, or high-income maritime industries. The exclusion of women from these industries has far-reaching consequences on sustainable development efforts. Research shows that gender inequality limits economic opportunities, exacerbates poverty, and undermines sustainability efforts (Olaewaju & Fernando, 2020).

In Africa, there are 38 coastal and island nations out of the 55 countries within the continent. Africa has immense BE potential. The AU approximates that Africa's Ocean asset worth will reach \$405 billion by 2030 (Ali, 2022). Despite, these opportunities, women remain marginalized in the continent's BE just like at the global level. Across the continent, gender disparities in marine and coastal industries stem from cultural norms, weak policy enforcement, and economic barriers (Maritima Africa, 2024).

Gender equity is a fundamental pillar of sustainable development. Gender Equity in Blue Growth ensures that both men and women have fair access to resources, opportunities, and decision-making roles while recognizing and addressing the unique challenges faced by each gender. This is consistent with the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)—particularly SDG 5 (Gender Equality) and SDG 14 (Life Below Water). Based on the two SDGs there is a need to empower women in marine industries to achieve Blue Growth. Many nations including Norway and Canada, have implemented gender-responsive policies that integrate women into maritime leadership, marine research, and ocean resource management.

Similarly, Kenya has embraced the Blue growth within the broader Blue Economy Strategy as central pillar of economic transformation. This is reflected in Kenya's development blueprints like the, Kenya Vision 2030, SDG 14 and 5, and African Union Agenda 2063. Kenya's Blue growth sectors presents immense economic potential that contributes approximately Kshs. 178.8 billion yearly to the Kenyan economy with the potential of generating Kshs. 500 billion annually (Republic of Kenya, 2018). This contribution is far from its full potential. Kenya could unlock the full potential of its marine economy while ensuring that economic benefits are fairly distributed. Achieving

sustainable and inclusive blue growth would require addressing structural inequalities like gender disparities.

However, there is limited scholarship on the Gender Equity -sustainable economic development nexus in Africa's Blue Growth sectors. This study uses a case study of Kenya to fill this knowledge gap. Consequently, this study examines how GE shapes sustainable economic development using a case study of Kenya's BE.

2. Theoretical Framework

This study is based on Feminist Economics as its theoretical framework. According to Becchio (2019), the theory has its origins in feminist theory which espouses a set of ideas and beliefs that women are not subordinate to men. FE is a school of thought that aims to achieve economic equality between men and women. FE is a critical approach to traditional economic theories (Becchio, 2019). It analyzes how economic structures and systems privilege men over women, and how this contributes to inequality.

Key proponents of FE include Marilyn Waring, Nancy Folbre, Julie A. Nelson, Diane Elson, and Bina Agarwal (Kongar & Berik, 2021). Proponents of FE argue that mainstream economics ignores gender disparities and undervalues women's contributions to economic growth. Instead, they advocate for inclusive policies that recognize and address structural barriers affecting women's participation and contribution to the economy. FE is relevant to this study as it critiques traditional economic models that overlook gender disparities in Kenya's BE. The theory advocates for gender-responsive policies such as ensuring equal access to resources, decision-making, and financial opportunities. Applying FE helps demonstrate how closing gender gaps in Kenya's Blue Economy can drive Blue Growth.

3. Methodology

This study utilized mixed research methodologies entailing both qualitative and quantitative techniques of data collection and analysis. The study relied on desk research to comprehensively review existing academic literature (secondary data) about the involvement of women in Kenya's maritime sector. Primary data was gathered through 48 key informant interviews (KIIs). The informants included representatives from the State Department For Gender and Affirmative Action (SDG-AA), the Kenya Marine and Fisheries Research Institute (KMFRI), the Kenya Fisheries Service (KeFS), the Bandari Maritime Academy (BMA), and Kenya Ports Authority (KPA); County government officials from coastal counties (Kwale, Lamu, Kilifi, and Mombasa); leaders from women-led groups such as the Baraka Women's Conservation Group and Wasini Women Group; influential local figures and traditional leaders.

The respondents were selected using purposive sampling and they included. The gathered data were analysed using content analysis. The study's findings were presented in narrative form, tables, and graphs.

4. Gender Equity and Kenya's Blue Growth

4.1 The State of Gender Equity in Kenya's BE

Gender disparities in Kenya are not only evident in the BE but are also reflected in broader human development indicators. The 2022 Gender Development Index (GDI) places Kenya in Group 3, with a female HDI value of 0.585 compared to 0.617 for males, resulting in a GDI value of 0.948 (UNDP, 2024). These findings indicate persistent inequalities in economic participation, education, and healthcare access. These structural inequalities also manifest in Kenya's BE sector. The women in Kenya's maritime sector are underrepresented and often confined to low-income and informal roles. Without addressing these disparities, Kenya's BE risks reinforcing existing gender inequalities rather than promoting inclusive and sustainable Blue Growth.

4.1.1 Women's Participation in Kenya's BE

Women play a crucial yet underrecognized role in Kenya's BE. Despite their contributions, gender disparities persist. Table 1 below summarizes the main findings from the study's 48 key informants.

Table 1: Women's Participation and Barriers in Kenya's Maritime Sectors

Maritime Sector	Participation/Roles	Challenges	Illustrative Quote
Fisheries	Predominantly involved in post-harvest processing, fish processing, and small-scale trading. Also shown by case studies of Fisheries at Lake Shakababo (Tana River County), Fisheries at Lake Moa (Lamu County), and Fisheries in Magarini (Kilifi County) (CISP & KENWEB, 2018). However, Gideon, R. M. (2023) notes that women are also involved in pre-harvest activities	The nocturnal nature of the fishing activity. Limited access to modern equipment and technology. Prevailing gender stereotypes. Illiteracy Lack of specialized training.	<i>"Women are mostly confined to fish processing and trading rather than being involved in direct fishing operations."</i>
Maritime Logistical Services and Transport	Often employed in administrative, port operations, and lower-level logistical roles rather than in navigation or engineering positions	Underrepresentation in technical and operational roles; limited access to advanced maritime training; gender bias in role allocation or gendered occupational segregation	<i>"Opportunities for women in technical maritime roles remain scarce due to entrenched stereotypes and limited training access."</i>

Maritime Commerce and Trade	Engage in local trade activities, small-scale entrepreneurship, and supply chain support, but rarely in high-value export trade.	Barriers to capital and formal business networks; market entry challenges; male-dominated trade networks.	<i>"Women actively contribute to local commerce yet face challenges breaking into more lucrative, formal trade networks."</i>
Tourism	Active in hospitality, cultural and eco-tourism, guiding services, and artisanal crafts.	Limited access to capital; wage disparities; and minimal representation in leadership positions.	<i>"Despite their significant contributions to coastal tourism, women often remain in lower-paying roles without opportunities for advancement."</i>
Biotechnology	Emerging in research, development, and innovation roles within marine biotechnology, albeit in small numbers.	Limited exposure to STEM fields; scarce specialized training; nascent stage of sector development leading to few opportunities.	<i>"Women are gradually making inroads into marine biotechnology, yet the sector remains largely underdeveloped for female participation."</i>
Mining/ Extractives	Typically relegated to support or administrative roles rather than operational or technical positions in extractive industries.	High physical demands; traditional exclusion due to cultural norms; safety concerns; limited access to technical roles.	<i>"In the mining sector, women's involvement is minimal, reflecting long-standing gender biases and safety concerns."</i>

Source: Author (2025)

4.1.2 Women's Access to Resources and Opportunities in Kenya's BE

Women in Kenya's BE face systemic barriers to accessing key resources and opportunities. The study identified three key domains of these barriers in Kenya's BE: credit, technology, and markets.

A. Limited Access to Credit and Financial Services

According to 45% of the study's key informants, women face limited access to credit and financial services. Access to finance and credit facilities is a critical enabler of business growth in the BE. However, women often face stringent lending conditions such as the requirement for collateral (land, boats, or equipment) which they typically lack. One informant aptly noted that the formal banking sector has historically marginalized women, forcing them to rely on informal savings groups that offer limited capital for business expansion (KII9, 2025). Government and private sector initiatives like blue economy funding schemes remain largely inaccessible to women due to bureaucratic hurdles and lack of financial literacy training.

B. Barriers to Technology and Innovation

The integration of modern fishing, aquaculture, and maritime technologies is essential for competitiveness in the BE. 34% of the study's respondents noted that women face

barriers to technology and innovation. One respondent noted that women have limited access to advanced fishing equipment, cold storage facilities, and digital platforms that could improve productivity and profitability (KII24, 2025). Traditional gender roles and social norms further restrict their participation in technical training programs. This setback makes women reliant on outdated methods that reduce efficiency. In addition, mobile and digital technologies which could provide market access and financial inclusion, remain underutilized due to the digital gender divide (KII11, 2025).

C. Restricted Market Access and Trade Opportunities

21% of the study's respondents acknowledged that women face restricted market access and trade opportunities in Kenya's maritime sector. Women are overrepresented in local fish markets but struggle to access high-value export markets. One respondent attributed these restrictions to a lack of formal business registration, trade networks, and policy support (KII48, 2025). The dominance of male traders and intermediaries in supply chains further limits their bargaining power, thus reinforcing economic inequality.

4.1.3 Existing Gender Gaps

The study's key informants also noted that the women in Kenya's maritime sector face substantial gender gaps. Emerging themes in the gender gaps analysis are categorized into three domains: income, employment, and decision-making power as discussed below. In a nutshell, these gender gaps limit women's economic agency and long-term sustainability in marine-based industries.

A. Income Disparities

80% of the study's key informants noted that women in the BE earn significantly lower incomes than men. One key informant attributed this income disparity to women's overrepresentation in informal, low-paying roles such as fish processing, small-scale trading, and beach vending (KII29, 2025). In contrast, men were found to dominate offshore fishing, maritime transport, and high-value aquaculture ventures that offer higher wages and profits. The lack of access to capital, technology, and formalized business structures further reduces women's earning potential. In addition, women face wage discrimination in formal employment within coastal tourism and marine conservation sectors where they are often underpaid despite equal workloads (KII10, 2025, KII43, 2025, KII20, 2025, KII15, 2025, & KII4, 2025).

B. Employment Inequality

76% of the study's respondents noted that Kenya's marine sectors employ more men than women. Employment opportunities in maritime transport, port management, deep-sea fishing, and marine research are largely male-dominated, with women making up only a small fraction of workers in these high-income sectors. A key informant noted that *"cultural norms and gendered occupational segregation discourage women from pursuing careers in ship navigation, engineering, and fisheries management."* (KII46, 2025). This results in a concentration of female labor in lower-tier jobs with minimal job security. Women's

employment is further constrained by limited access to technical training and mentorship opportunities in BE sectors (KII8, 2025 & KII30, 2025).

C. Underrepresentation in Decision-Making

90% of the study's key informants noted that women are underrepresented in decision-making bodies related to ocean governance. Women rarely hold leadership positions in fisheries cooperatives, marine conservation organizations, and governmental agencies overseeing ocean governance (KII12, 2025, KII22, 2025). Women's underrepresentation in maritime governance is a significant structural challenge that limits gender-inclusive decision-making. The absence of women's voices in marine policy formulation reinforces structural inequalities and results in governance frameworks that fail to address gender-specific challenges. Consequently, compromising the full realization of gender-inclusive Blue Growth.

4.2 The Potential for Gender-inclusive Blue Growth

4.2.1 Gender-Responsive Policies for Enhancing Women's Participation in Kenya's BE

Gender-responsive policies are crucial for addressing systemic barriers that limit women's participation in Kenya's maritime sectors. The study identified four key themes for gender-responsive policies. These included legal and institutional reforms, financial inclusion, technology and training initiatives, and promoting women's leadership and representation as shown in Table 2 and Figure 1 below.

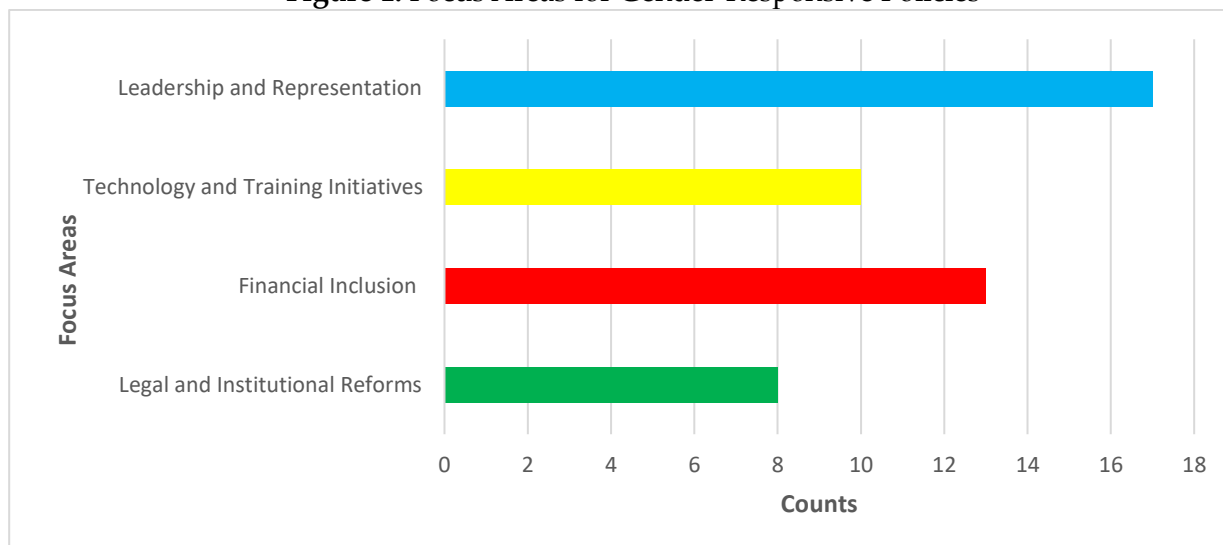
Table 2: Focus Areas for Gender-Responsive Policies

		Frequency	Percent (%)	Cumulative Percent (%)
Valid	Legal and Institutional Reforms	8	17	17
	Financial Inclusion	13	27	44
	Technology and Training Initiatives	10	21	65
	Leadership and Representation	17	35	100.00
	Total	48	100.00	

Source: Author (2025).

From Table 2 and Figure 1, the majority of the study's key informants (35%) acknowledged that gender-responsive policies should focus on women's leadership and representation in Kenya's maritime sector. Other focus areas included financial inclusion (27%), technology and training initiatives (21%), and legal and institutional reforms (17%). This distribution indicates a strong consensus on the need to empower women through improved decision-making roles and targeted economic support.

Figure 1: Focus Areas for Gender-Responsive Policies



Source: Author (2025).

Figure 1 further visualizes the four focus areas, emphasizing the multifaceted policy approach required to ensure a more inclusive maritime sector. Overall, these insights significantly guide policymakers toward inclusive maritime growth. The implementation of policies focusing on the four areas mentioned above will empower women to play a more active role in Kenya's Blue Growth sectors.

4.2.3 The Potential of Women-Led Enterprises in Driving Sustainable Economic Growth in the BE

Women-led enterprises have the potential to be transformative drivers of sustainable economic growth in Kenya's BE. Women possess distinct dispositions and experiences that elevate them above their male counterparts insofar as the marine conservation agenda is concerned. These qualities include being more environmentally conscious than men, being inclusive, and having collaborative roles (Kassinis *et al.*, 2016, Gissi *et al.*, 2018). Women-led enterprises offer unique insights into localized community needs and innovative approaches to resource management. Given the unique disposition, experiences, and intrinsic knowledge of coastal ecosystems and communities, women entrepreneurs are more likely to invest in community-based and eco-friendly business models like sustainable fish farming, seaweed cultivation, and marine conservation tourism. These ventures not only generate income and create jobs but also promote biodiversity conservation and responsible resource use. Consequently, having more women in Kenya's maritime sector makes the sector more inclusive, resilient, and environmentally sustainable.

In addition, empowering women-led businesses enhances financial inclusion and broadens access to capital and markets. This creates a more diversified and dynamic economic landscape. As Kenya's Blue growth sectors evolves, prioritizing and supporting women-led enterprises will be crucial in i) addressing gender disparities ii) reinforcing social equity and iii) unlocking untapped economic opportunities within the maritime sector. Therefore, full integration of women in Kenya's Blue Growth sectors will

foster resilient and sustainable economic development as will be shown in the two case studies below.

5. Case Studies

5.1 Case Study 1: Baraka Women's Conservation Group

The Baraka Women's Conservation Group (BWCG) is a women-led mariculture initiative based in Makongeni, Kwale County. This women's group combines income generation with marine conservation. Faced with declining fish stocks and limited economic opportunities, a group of 24 members (20 women and 4 men) established this initiative to rear marine fish as an alternative to traditional fishing.

The group has had success in economically empowering its members through mariculture. The group harvests an average of 400 kilograms of fish per cycle, generating around Ksh. 200,000 (\$2,000) per harvest (KII16, 2025). This has improved the financial independence of women in the community. In addition to fish farming, members engage in mangrove restoration, cultivating and selling seedlings to support reforestation efforts and enhance marine biodiversity. With support from the KMFRI, the women have had training in fish farming, pond management, and fish feed production, thus enhancing their expertise in mariculture (KII3, 2025).

Despite the successes, BWCG faces several challenges. First, technical barriers – Initially, the women lacked training and unknowingly mixed incompatible fish species, affecting productivity (KII19, 2025). Secondly, seasonal flooding damages dykes and embankments and exposes BWCG to costly repairs (KII3, 2025). Despite BWCG members' efforts, mangrove seedlings sell for only Ksh 20 (\$0.20) each (KII16, 2025). Such low market prices limit profits from conservation activities. Nonetheless, BWCG demonstrates how women-led mariculture can enhance economic resilience, marine conservation, and GE in Kenya's BE.

5.2 Case Study 2: Wasini Women Group

The Wasini Women Group (WWG) is a women-led initiative that integrates eco-tourism, marine conservation, and community empowerment. The 600-member group is based in Wasini Island, Kwale County (Okata, 2022). WWG was established to diversify income sources and promote sustainable environmental practices. According to Frau (2020), Wasini had lost nearly two-thirds of its coral heritage. In response, women actively participate in coral reef restoration and mangrove reforestation. Okata (2022) noted that Wasini Island is now covered by a mangrove canopy covering over 1236 acres of land courtesy of restoration efforts like planting an estimated 200,000 mangrove seedlings. WWG collaborates with organizations such as the KMFRI, KFS, and Coast Development Authority (CDA) among other agencies in capacity-building projects. Consequently, the women receive training and technical support to improve conservation efforts.

In addition, the conservation efforts are also linked to income-generating activities like eco-tourism. According to Irandu & Shah (2014), the Wasini women are solely in control of the coral islands through ecotourism. The group runs boat tours, snorkelling

excursions, and cultural tourism experiences. These initiatives attract both local and international tourists (KII45, 2025). WWG is directly responsible for the management and operations of boardwalks (a raised looped wooden platform extending over 500 metres within the island's mangrove vegetation and beautiful fossil coral gardens), provides guiding services, and collects visitors' fees. Revenue generated supports women's economic independence and community projects like clean water initiatives and education programs for girls (KII44, 2025). These initiatives improve overall community well-being. According to Okata (2022), WWG initiatives have improved marine life and biodiversity, alleviated climate change effects, improved employment opportunities (230 women employed as conservationists, forest guards, and tour guides) and incomes for women and youth, and food security

Despite the successes, WWG faces seasonal fluctuations in tourism (KII44, 2025). This affects their income stability. In addition, there is limited financial support. Access to grants and low-interest loans for expanding operations remains a challenge (KII45, 2025). Nevertheless, the WWG demonstrates how women-led eco-tourism and marine conservation initiatives can contribute to sustainable economic development and gender empowerment in Kenya's BE. The WWG is a blueprint for Blue growth initiatives in Kenya's BE- combining conservation efforts with income-generating activities.

6. Policy Recommendations

Based on the analysis of gender disparities in Kenya's BE, this study proposes five key recommendations;

- 1) The State Department for Fisheries and the Blue Economy (SDF-BE) should ensure that all stakeholders in Kenya's maritime sector adhere to the gender equity provision as enshrined in the 2010 Constitution of Kenya, especially Articles 10 and 27 (1) (3) (4), (6), and (8).
- 2) The Ministry of Finance, State Department for Gender, and Affirmative Action, and SDF-BE should spearhead the design and implementation of targeted financial instruments including microfinance programs, government-backed loans, and cooperative lending models. Private sector financial institutions will be essential partners in developing and delivering these financial products. In addition, these initiatives should be complemented by robust financial literacy training to empower women to overcome traditional collateral requirements and access formal credit.
- 3) There is a need for a coordinated, multi-stakeholder approach in implementing affirmative action policies to boost female representation in decision-making bodies in Kenya's marine sectors. Greater participation will ensure that gender perspectives are integrated into policy formulation and resource management.
- 4) Ensuring Digital Inclusion and Technological Access: Improving women's access to modern maritime technologies and digital platforms can significantly enhance their economic participation in Kenya's Blue Economy. Advanced fishing gear, refrigeration systems, and aquaculture innovations can increase productivity,

reduce post-harvest losses, and improve product quality, ensuring better market access and higher incomes. Digital inclusion through mobile banking, e-commerce platforms, and digital trade networks allows women to access financial services, market information, and global buyers, overcoming traditional barriers of physical market access and male-dominated supply chains.

- 5) The Ministry of Investments, Trade, and Industries in collaboration with the Ministry of Mining, Blue Economy, and Maritime Affairs should facilitate the integration of women-led enterprises into regional and global supply chains by supporting export-oriented initiatives and establishing strategic trade networks
- 6) Creating Awareness of Women-Led Blue Growth: It is essential to increase public and stakeholder understanding of the contributions of women-led enterprises and the benefits of inclusive participation. The government, particularly through ministries such as the Ministry of Gender and the Ministry of Trade, should spearhead targeted awareness campaigns. These initiatives can leverage media platforms, community outreach, and educational programs to challenge prevailing gender stereotypes and highlight success stories from the sector.

7. Conclusion

This study assessed achieving sustainable economic development in Africa through gender equity in the maritime sector. The study was based on a case study of Kenya's Blue growth. The study found that despite the significant contributions of women in Kenya's maritime sector, gender disparities continue to hinder their full economic participation. There were gaps in resource access and opportunities; income, employment, and decision-making power. Addressing these inequalities through targeted policies is crucial for unlocking the potential of women in the BE. Kenya can build a more resilient, inclusive, and sustainable Blue Growth model by creating an enabling environment for women's greater involvement. This sets a strong example for other African nations striving for GE in their economic development strategies. The study concludes that achieving GE in Kenya's BE is essential for driving sustainable economic growth and fostering inclusive development within Africa.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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