

THE ISSUE IN BRIEF

THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON WOMEN IN THE BLUE ECONOMY

What's The Issue?

Intensifying climate disasters, changing weather patterns, ocean acidification and sea-level rise, are increasingly disrupting coastal communities, devastating marine ecosystems and damaging livelihoods dependent on the blue economy.

In Asia and the Pacific, women play a large role in the blue economy but their contribution is often overlooked and undervalued. Women's work within the blue economy lacks formal recognition and women are greatly underrepresented within policy and decision-making related to the ocean and climate change. However, for billions of women the ocean is a life-support system – providing food, resources and jobs.

Gender inequality is known to make women suffer disproportionately from the adverse effects of climate change; with social, economic and political barriers increasing women's exposure and susceptibility to the negative impacts of climate change. Consequently, a gender-responsive approach to both climate change resilience and economic resilience within the blue economy is crucial to address the increased levels of vulnerability experienced by women and to empower women in the face of climate change.

Key Facts

Ocean-based sectors contribute significantly to the economy of Asia-Pacific countries. The share of blue economy in the GDP of Asia-Pacific countries varies from as low as 1% to as high as 30% and in a few island nations the GDP contribution is as high as 87%¹ - with future sustainable development dependent on healthy oceans.

Approximately 350 million jobs are linked to the oceans globally - through fishing, aquaculture, coastal and marine tourism and research activities.² Women constitute nearly half of those employed in fisheries globally³, with 85% of the total global population employed in the fishing sector being in Asia.¹ Women who work in traditional fisheries in Asia and the Pacific face low-incomes and precarious work in both the informal and formal sector.³ They also face reduced access to credit and limited access to technical training. They can often work to support the family business and supplement family income, consequently they may not always receive a wage.⁴ Women play a primary role in aquaculture, as well as shore-based activities such as fish processing, marketing and selling.³ In **Bangladesh**, 70% of the 50,000 people employed in the shrimp processing sector are women; a sector which has minimal regulation and poor working conditions.⁵

Climate change is predicted to reduce the productivity of fish stocks and catch potential in coastal areas of the Pacific Ocean through ocean warming, ocean acidification and changing oceanic currents. In the **Philippines**, climate change impacts

on marine capture fisheries is expected to cause a decrease of around 9% and up to 18% of fisheries GDP, dependent on different baseline climate change scenarios.⁶

This is predicted to reduce income in rural households by around 0.38%⁶, with climate change perpetuating increased competition over declining fishery resources; impacting livelihoods in the blue economy. Economic shocks and declining resources have a disproportionate impact on women who are already employed in precarious positions within the sector and receive lower wages than men, often without employment tenure. Fish scarcity often causes women to be edged out of the fish trade by local men.³ Declining fish stocks also pose a huge threat to food security in the region, with fish being the main source of animal protein in **Indonesia, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh**⁷ and an important staple food across the **Pacific Islands**.

As a result of the gendered division of labour, which assigns women with domestic and care work, women are responsible for ensuring household food security. Consequently, lower fish availability can significantly impact the food security of fishing families. Also, concerns related to the realization of human rights exist, as gendered fishery practices can influence women's right to decent livelihoods.⁸ Special policy measures are therefore needed to protect the small-scale sector, women fish workers and their families.

Alternatively, sea-level rise will have severe implications for low-lying islands and coastal communities. Reduced biodiversity of coastal ecosystems, habitat contraction, salinisation of the soil and fresh water supplies and loss of agricultural productivity are all expected to progress dramatically with climate change⁹, eroding livelihoods. Moreover, both fishing and aquaculture, if not managed properly, can impact biodiversity and ecosystem functions through, unsustainable bycatch, overfishing, excessive nutrient release, chemical pollution, and the escape of farmed species and

diseases into the natural environment.¹⁰ Thus, depleting marine life, threatening endangered species and harming coastal communities.

Impact of COVID-19 on Women Engaged in the Blue Economy

Climate change, along with the covid-19 pandemic, is also having a large impact on the coastal tourism industry. Quite often tourism infrastructure is located in disaster-prone areas, such as coastal regions, requiring adequate DRR planning to protect the lives of those living and working on these sights.⁸ In **Tonga**, climate change has been found to have severely impacted key land and marine-based natural areas used for tourism; with beach and vegetation loss due to sea-level rise, damage to tourist resorts and impacts on coral reef health.¹¹ During the covid-19 pandemic travel and tourism employment in the Asia-Pacific region fell by 18.4%, which equates to a loss of 34.1million jobs¹² – highlighting the multiple risks the tourism sector is facing and its potential role in driving economic recovery. Globally, the majority of the tourism sector workforce is female, with 54% of people employed in tourism being women in comparison to 39% in the broader economy. Women in tourism are also over-represented in service and clerical jobs, whilst making-up only 25% of those at decision-making levels.¹³ In **Small Island Developing States (SIDs)** women constitute more than half of those employed in the accommodation and food services sectors.¹⁴ There are also major power imbalances between large scale investors and local communities, which may put the rights of women and indigenous peoples in danger.⁸ Under economic and environmental pressures, the low-skilled, seasonal and informal jobs are the first to be lost, meaning women are most likely to be hit by job losses and experience a higher incidence of poverty. Women also find it more difficult to access credit than men, making it more difficult for them to preserve their tourism businesses in times of crisis.¹⁴ Therefore, policies are needed, as part of a green recovery, to protect women's jobs and businesses in the tourism sector as climate change progresses.

Our Solutions

- **Demonstrate political commitment to gender-mainstreaming; ensuring national policies related to the blue economy and climate change involve gender integration.**
- **Improve existing national information regarding the role of women in the blue economy through the collection of sex-disaggregated data and generation of gender statistics.**
- **Increase collaboration between the Ministry of Oceans and Fisheries, Ministry of Tourism and Ministry of Labour, with the Ministry of Women's Affairs.**
- **Develop capacity building and livelihood diversification of women and marginalized groups to help them deal with the economic impacts of climate change.**
- **Ensure gender-responsive climate financing and support the generation of expertise on gender mainstreaming within environmental and economic ministries through increased resource allocation and training.**
- **Conduct studies by country and region on the gendered impacts of climate change within the blue economy, to identify entry points through which to integrate gender into climate-related policies.**
- **Establish dialogue and stakeholder consultations with women working in the blue economy; utilising a bottom-up approach to facilitate knowledge sharing and awareness raising amongst policymakers.**

End Notes

¹ Juneja, M., De Souza, C., Giriyan, A.L. & Ganeshan, S. 2021. Contextualising Blue Economy in Asia-Pacific Region – Exploring Pathways for a Regional Cooperation Framework. *The Energy and Resources Institute (TERI) India*.

² Robert, J. 2015. The Blue Economy: From Concept to Reality in the Caribbean Region. *Discussion paper for the Caribbean Regional Dialogue with the G20 Development Working Group*.

³ UN Women. 2020. Women's Economic Empowerment in Fisheries in the Blue Economy of the Indian Ocean Rim: A Baseline Report.

⁴ Siason, I.M., Tech, E., Matics, K.I., Choo, P.S., Shariff, M., Heruwati, E.S., Susilowati, T., Miki, N., Shelley, A.B., Rajabharshi, K.G., Ranjit, R., Siriwardena, P.P.G.N., Nandeesh, M.C. & Sunderarajan, M. 2002. Women in Fisheries in Asia. *Working Papers: The WorldFish Centre*.

⁵ Nuruzzaman, M. 2013. Compliance Is Key. *Yemaya ICSF's Newsletter on Gender and Fisheries* 42, March.

⁶ Suh, D. & Pomeroy, R. 2020. Projected Economic Impact of Climate Change on Marine Capture Fisheries in the Philippines. *Frontiers in Marine Science*. 7(232).

⁷ CEA (California Environment Institute). 2018. Trends in Marine Resources and Fisheries Management in Indonesia: A 2018 Review. *San Francisco, CA: CEA*.

⁸ UN Women. 2021. Climate change, gender equality and human rights in Asia – Regional review and promising practices.

⁹ Oppenheimer, M., B.C. Glavovic, J. Hinkel, R. van de Wal, A.K. Magnan, A. Abd-Elgawad, R. Cai, M. Cifuentes-Jara, R.M. DeConto, T. Ghosh, J. Hay, F. Isla, B. Marzeion, B. Meyssignac, and Z. Sebesvari. 2019. Sea Level Rise and Implications for Low-Lying Islands, Coasts and Communities. In: *IPCC Special Report on the Ocean and Cryosphere in a Changing Climate* [H.-O. Pörtner, D.C. Roberts, V. Masson-Delmotte, P. Zhai, M. Tignor, E. Poloczanska, K. Mintenbeck, A. Alegría, M. Nicolai, A. Okem, J. Petzold, B. Rama, N.M. Weyer (eds.)]

¹⁰ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Bangladesh. 2019. Blue Economy – Development of Sea Resources for Bangladesh. <https://mofa.gov.bd/site/page/8c5b2a3f-9873-4f27-8761-2737db83c2ec/OCEAN/BLUE-ECONOMY-FOR-BANGLADESH>

¹¹ Wolf, F., Filho, W.L., Singh, P., Scherle, N., Reiser, D., Telesford, J., Milijakovic, I.B., Havea, P.N., Li, C., Surrop. & Kovaleva, M. 2021. Influences of Climate Change on Tourism Development in Small Pacific Island States. *Sustainability*. 13(4223).

¹² World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC). 2021. Travel & Tourism Economic Impact 2021. *Global Economic Impact & Trends 2021*.

¹³ World Tourism Organisation. 2019. Global report on Women and Tourism. Second edition.

¹⁴ Zarrilli, S & Aydiner-Avsar, N. 2020. Covid-19 puts women working in SIDS tourism industry at risk. *United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD)*.