

# POLICY BRIEF

JOLEEN STEYN KOTZE, NARNIA BOHLER-MULLER | MARCH 2022

## Counting Women? Gendered sustainability and inclusivity for an **Ocean Accounts Framework**: Key policy considerations

### Executive summary

Oceans are increasingly gaining scholarly and policy attention as a means to achieve economic and social prosperity. Through the notion of the 'blue economy'<sup>1</sup>, the international policy narrative constructs the oceans as critical for sustainable development and human well-being. Furthermore, the major economic potential of the oceans necessitates some measure of how ocean resources are used to advance social and economic inclusion, sustainable development, and human well-being. Ocean accounting is critical in the context of equitable and inclusive socioeconomic development. Given the aim of sustainable and inclusive development on which the Blue Economy is built, there is a need to consider gender within ocean governance and accounting systems. This policy brief engages a gendered analysis of ocean governance and accounting to facilitate a more nuanced understanding of policy directives needed for inclusive and sustainable development through the Blue Economy.

### Introduction

The Global Ocean Accounts Partnership (2019) highlights oceans as the 'foundation of social and economic development ... Oceans make major contributions, many irreplaceable, to human well-being and development'. Due to the major economic potential found within oceans, there is an increasing need to account for ocean resources and how they are used (Global Ocean Accounts Partnership 2019), most notably around 'context-specific relationships between economic prosperity, social well-being and oceans (and how these change over time)'. This 'knowledge gap' undermines the ability of governments to effectively and successfully plan and implement policy decisions to facilitate inclusive development through the blue economy (Global Ocean Accounts Partnership 2019). According to the United Nations (2015a), oceans are critical to human well-being and sustainable development, given the economic potential and need to conserve oceans to mitigate the negative impact of climate change. The enduring climate crisis and focus on ocean sustainability necessitates consideration of



the relationship between gender and the blue economy, especially with a focus on how one accounts for production and consumption as well as social justice and inclusivity within this economy.

### Counting Blue Justice: The Ocean Accounts Framework and ocean governance

Conceptually, the idea of a blue economy seeks to advance economic development and social inclusion, and to enhance livelihoods while working to ensure the environmental sustainability of the oceans and coastal territories (World Bank 2017: vi). At its core lies the commitment 'to decouple socioeconomic development from environmental degradation, by the incorporation of the real value of the natural capital (ocean values and services) into all aspects of economic activity' (World Bank 2017: vi). A key component of the blue economy is

<sup>1</sup> The blue economy is defined as the 'sustainable use of ocean resources for economic growth, improved livelihoods, and jobs while preserving the health of the ocean ecosystem' (World Bank 2017).

its emphasis on recognising that the ecosystem services provided by the ocean are essential to achieving the global priorities of poverty eradication and transformation for inclusive and sustainable development for overall human well-being (Rumbaitis del Rio 2014). However, it has also been noted that there is a need to ensure 'equitable access to marine resources even as we put in place measures to better manage that access to reduce unsustainable use' (Rumbaitis del Rio 2014).

The conceptualisation of the blue economy encompasses a strong empowerment element of social justice (see Figure 1). It is also regarded as the vehicle through which to advance women's empowerment. Steyn Kotze et al (2019) through their research show a strong policy correlation between blue economy, sustainability and women's empowerment, creating a policy discourse of women's empowerment through the oceans. The common conceptual pillars underpinning the blue economy are shown in Figure 1 below.

**Figure 1 Common conceptual pillars of the blue economy**



There are key risks relating to ocean governance within the context of the blue economy. Haas et al (2021) highlight that ocean governance, and by default the ocean's political economies, will be characterised by complexity and conflicting goals and worldviews from different stakeholders – including the state, civil society, local communities, and market actors – all with diverging political agendas. For Haas et al (2021), there are five key drivers that will impact how the oceans are governed: formal rules and institutions, evidence- and knowledge-based decision-making, legitimacy of those decision-making bodies, stakeholder engagement and participation, and the empowerment of communities.

From this perspective, one can argue that an ocean accounting framework should facilitate measurable outputs in respect of social, environmental, cultural and economic justice within the political economy that shape the blue economy. Consider, for example, the notion of ecofeminism, which dominated policy and political

narrative on gender and environmental governance in the 1990s. Ecofeminism sought to politicise the importance of women as key stakeholders in environmental protection focusing on economic and other inequalities generated through 'exploitation and oppression of nature and women' as well as the 'way that technology is used to control, degrade and destroy the environment as well as the impact this has had on women's lives and livelihoods' (Foster 2021: 6–7). While ecofeminism was for the most part rejected, the Rio Earth Summit of 1992 promoted women's participation and visibility in global environmental initiatives (Foster 2021: 1). It is important to note that women's visibility and not voice was promoted, thus prompting a focus on considering women in environmental policy as opposed to including women in environmental policymaking processes. Therefore, while we note a shift in the international political and economic space towards gender sensitivity and an acknowledgement of gender vulnerability, this did not directly translate into a reordering of the political and economic space to advance real gender inclusion in policymaking. A similar pattern occurs within the policy narrative of the ocean accounting framework, blue economy and ocean governance. Indeed, Gissi, Portman and Hornidge (2018: 214) argue that when considering gender within ocean governance:

not only equity, or power-plays between genders are at stake; in addition, for effective ocean governance, an irreducible contribution of female voices is necessary ... If women, for instance, are not included in fisheries management, we miss the complete picture of social-ecological linkages of marine ecosystems ... Similarly, women have advocated for the common good in marine conservation, raising important (and often neglected) concerns. In maritime industries, women enlarge the talent pool for innovation and smart growth. Beside the manifold possibilities for promoting the involvement of women in ocean governance and policy-making ... gendered biases still influence our interactions with the ocean. It is necessary to reduce the structural, and systemically embedded hurdles that continue to lead to gendered decision-taking with regard to the ocean.

In addition to ocean governance narratives still advocating the inclusion of women voices in ocean policymaking and governance, a form of blue ecofeminism also calls for a broader, more inclusive and holistic approach to gender justice that includes indigenous voices and knowledge as well as culture within the policy narrative regarding the oceans (Bossi 2020: 38). For Bossi (2020: 38) there is a need to rethink oceans discourse with a focus on blue ecofeminism with a view to bring about inclusive, gender-just, and healthier seas.

Within the policy narratives surrounding ocean governance and the ocean accounting framework, including the underlying conceptualisation of a blue economy, we note a continued gendered political economy that advocates not merely for the visibility of women, but also for voice and agency to influence policy directives for sustainable development within the oceans' political economy, both from a gendered perspective but also an environmental political economy lens.

### **Gendered political economy: The critical lens for an ocean accounting framework**

Policy narratives around ocean governance and blue economy initiatives speak of enhancing the economic power of women through economic inclusion for gender equity, increasing the political power of women through appointments to high-level decision-making structures for voice and presentation, and facilitating the economic inclusion of women for sustainable development. And, as Peterson (2006: 82) notes that making women visible in development is of extreme importance, one also cannot negate the creation of gendered economic dichotomies where 'women/femininity cannot simply be "added" to constructions that are constituted as masculine: reason, economic man, breadwinner, the public sphere' (original emphasis). For Peterson, one needs to move towards a more analytical conceptualisation of gender in political economies, 'as gender is a governing code that pervades language, and hence systematically shapes how we think, what we presume to "know" and how such knowledge claims are legitimated'.

There is thus a need to interrogate the relationship between gender and transformation, cultural norms that govern gender, and what the political imaginary of gender justice is for an ocean governance and ocean accounting framework. More importantly, the narrative around the gendered political economy and sustainable development also flags whose voices are included, heard, and prioritised in narratives of inclusive and sustainable development. Peterson (2006: 82–83) details numerous studies that continue to challenge the notion that development benefits all, given the high levels of exclusion in underdeveloped and developing societies where women remain at the periphery of developmental accounting paradigms. Bennett et al (2020: 7) highlights 'significant gaps between reality and rhetoric' within the blue economy narrative, flagging the unequal distribution of resources in the oceans economy as a key caveat where patterns of ownership and control of resources remain centralised and mirror patterns of global inequality. Furthermore, Bennett et al (2020: 8–9) detail how women remain at the developmental periphery of blue development despite policy initiatives aimed at women's empowerment, noting that 'gender inequalities are ignored and risk being exacerbated by blue growth'. For the authors, this finds expression in

the continued 'invisible roles' women play in fisheries where they are 'unrecognised, unpaid, or underpaid' and 'broader "structures of discrimination" continue to produce and reproduce their inequalities that lead to their marginalisation in fisheries and other sectors of the ocean economy'. Other factors include unpaid care work, lack of access to sufficient capital and finance, exclusion from policy planning, and male labour migration, where '[women's] level of agency and bargaining power within the household diminishes, making them more vulnerable to marginalisation, exploitation and abuse' (Bennett et al, 2020: 9).

Exclusion from consultation, decision-making and mapping processes also exacerbates gender vulnerability within the oceans economy, given that women often lose access to resources they depend on for their livelihoods, as 'resource use and access are highly gendered and shaped by access to capital, assets, knowledge and relationships across life course' (Bennett et al 2020: 9). Thus, while the blue economy is often constructed as a new frontier and 'spaces of opportunity' (Bennett, et al 2020), there are caveats that can recreate patterns of exclusion and marginalisation. This can have immense impact on ocean accounting frameworks, which also carry a transformational dynamic in terms of the desire to measure sustainability and inclusivity.

Consider the policy narratives around gender and the blue economy – the foundation on which the ocean accounting framework is built. The ocean governance and policy narrative regarding the blue economy stresses capacity building for women, rendering women as passive participants in initiatives to develop their capacity to become key role players in the blue economy or to enable them to draw on the distributive potential of an ocean's economy. This approach relegates women to the domain of passivity (a traditional gender construct) rather than renders them active agents in their own capacity-building where they are able to decide, influence and design what capacity building is needed. While the capabilities approach to gender mainstreaming in development policy and narrative is important, it perpetuates the dilemma where merely adding women to development allows a structural limitation to gender justice to remain intact, as Peterson (2006: 83) notes:

It did not address the denigration of feminised labour, the structural privileging of men and masculinity, the depoliticization of women's subordination in the family and workplace, or the increasing pressure to work a triple shift (in familial, informal and formal activities) ... thus problematising the meaning and desirability of 'development', interrogated the definition of work and how to 'count it'.



In this context, it is thus important to develop a matrix that can facilitate sufficient gendered data to count women in the blue economy. To facilitate this, we propose the following matrix:

Dimension	Variables
Economic empowerment	Evidence of women working and receiving training in any of the six sectors of the blue economy. Monitoring of carbon credit programmes for women to ensure that they are remunerated for their work in this important area. Creation of remuneration programmes to include women in citizen science to monitor the environmental impact on ocean-economy-related activities in coastal communities. Tax incentives for gendered training and inclusion through training for private-sector companies active in the areas of the blue economy.
Sociocultural empowerment	Evidence of women in ministerial, directorship, senior management, and community leadership positions or associations' leadership positions that relate to the blue economy and ocean governance. Credit, lending or funding schemes for women groups in fishing, aquaculture or any ocean-economy-related business.
Education	Programmes in education institutions that relate to the ocean economy. Monitoring of levels of enrolment in STEM-related fields for the development of emergent oceans economy sectors, and monitoring of women's educational empowerment to contribute to those sectors. Monitoring of capacity-building programmes at a lower-income community level to teach women life skills and financial management, as well as to empower them with knowledge on key oceans economy sectors to which they can contribute. Active engagement with women within the ocean economy sectors on what their specific needs are as well as creating engagement opportunities for the inclusion of women's voices in critical policy spaces.
Health and welfare	Health improvement programmes for women working in any of the blue economy sectors, most notably male-dominated sectors. Furthermore, there is a need for in-depth ethnographic research to capture women's experiences to facilitate key interventions that would promote greater gender equality within traditionally male-dominated sectors in the blue economy.
Policy directives	Engagement with key stakeholders on policy development and gender mainstreaming to facilitate women's economic empowerment in the blue economy.

## Recommendations

1. In developing a social account measure for gender inclusivity within the ocean economy, one would require targeted and specific policy differentiation driven by the findings of evidence-based policy research, such as relevant case studies on ocean accounting and social and gender inclusivity. This would also entail sufficient investment in research capacity building, not just in natural and ocean sciences, but also humanities and social sciences, to unpack and understand the gendered and environmental political economy dynamics that shape and impact inclusion, sustainability, and gender justice within an ocean economy.
2. There needs to be a broader campaign on blue economy and social accounting mechanisms within the structures of ocean governance and social accounting frameworks. Focus should be placed on sectors of the oceans economy where women are underrepresented or discriminated against. This would include traditionally male-dominated sectors such as ocean's renewable technology, seabed mining, and seafarer and shipping. This, however, would require sufficient data to determine to what extent and for what reason women are or remain excluded from certain industries within the ocean economy. As such, this is a key future research priority for facilitating a gendered accounting framework on who participates within these key sectors.
3. An adequate and holistic matrix to facilitate the counting of women's participation in the blue economy, for sustainable and inclusive development and policy planning and implementation, must be developed and implemented.



2 The six sectors of the blue economy are marine safety and security; trade and investment; fisheries and management; disaster risk management, tourism and culture; and academic, science and technology.

## Endnotes

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## AUTHORS

**Joleen Steyn Kotze**, Chief Research Specialist: Democracy and Citizenship, HSRC (Developmental, Capable and Ethical State Research Programme); Research Fellow, University of the Free State (Centre for Gender and African Studies).

**Narnia Bohler-Muller**, Divisional Executive, HSRC (Developmental, Capable and Ethical State); Research Fellow, University of the Free State (Centre for Gender and African Studies).