



ADVOCACY BRIEF

Beyond the Shoreline: A Crisis of Exploitation and Silenced Voices for Women Fisherfolk in Mombasa County

Rights, Dignity, and Equitable Participation of Women in Mombasa's Fisheries Value Chain

ABOUT CEFRESA

The **Centre for Resilience and Sustainable Africa (CEFRESA)** is a coastal-based organization advancing climate-resilient governance, inclusive environmental policy processes, and sustainable ecosystem management through strategic advocacy and stakeholder engagement. The organization plays a critical role in bridging grassroots realities, technical expertise, and county-level decision-making by translating complex environmental and climate policies into accessible, action-oriented frameworks that strengthen legislative uptake and implementation. Through participatory advocacy, evidence-based engagement, and sustained collaboration with duty bearers, CEFRESA has positioned itself as a credible policy influencer, contributing to the institutionalization of responsive climate and environmental frameworks that drive sustainable development and accountable governance.

This advocacy brief draws from a Women Fisherfolk Convening facilitated by CEFRESA in Mombasa County, creating a platform for women to articulate lived realities, assert their rights, and advance collective policy demands for dignity, protection, and equitable participation.





WOMEN FISHERFOLK: ROLES, VALUE, AND VULNERABILITIES

Women fisherfolk in Mombasa comprise women engaged across the fisheries value chain as traders, processors, vendors, transporters, and small-scale livelihood actors whose survival and household income depend directly on fish-based activities. They are central to the sector, forming over 60% of the coastal post-harvest workforce and driving processing, vending, storage, and market distribution. While integrated within Beach Management Units (BMUs), their roles remain confined to labor, with persistent exclusion from leadership, decision-making, and resource control.

This exclusion is being intensified by climate change-driven fish stock decline, with a 35% reduction in artisanal catches over the past decade (KMFRI) attributed to rising sea temperatures, ecosystem degradation, unpredictable seasons, and coastal pollution. As fish availability shrinks, women's bargaining power weakens, dependence on male-dominated supply chains increases, and exposure to exploitation, coercion, and gender-based violence deepens. The challenge is therefore not participation, but the denial of equitable decision-making power. This brief calls for a shift from symbolic inclusion to meaningful influence over BMU leadership, fisheries policy, safeguarding systems, climate response strategies, and benefit-sharing mechanisms.



WOMEN FISHERFOLK CONVENING – MOMBASA COUNTY

CEFRESA convened the Women Fisherfolk Dialogue on 24 September 2021 at the Pastoral Centre, Mombasa County, bringing together 40 women fisherfolk from Beach Management Units, including *Likoni, Tudor, Shanzu, Mikindani, and Nyali*. The convening functioned as a safe space forum for experiential sharing, structured advocacy, and a capacity-strengthening forum focused on rights awareness, governance participation, and collective mobilization.

What emerged most strongly was the deeply normalized nature of *gender-based violence* (GBV), sexual exploitation, harassment, coercion, and intimidation experienced by women across both offshore and onshore spaces at landing sites, in boats, markets, and transport corridors. Even those who attempt to speak out are frequently silenced through threats, retaliation, stigma, and economic punishment, perpetuated by entrenched patriarchal norms that undermine women's contribution to the sector.

Participants were sensitized on their constitutional rights, labor protections, and safeguarding entitlements. The session catalyzed self-awareness and collective consciousness, reinforcing that their numerical strength represents political leverage capable of driving reform when mobilized. The convening, therefore, positioned women not as passive victims but as rights-holders and agents of change demanding accountability, justice, and systemic transformation.

The prevalence of abuse and exploitation was identified as a *critical protection crisis within the blue economy*, requiring immediate prioritization of safeguarding systems and alternative livelihood pathways to reduce women's exposure, dependency, and risk.



KEY TAKEAWAYS FROM THE CONVENING

CHALLENGES

- Climate change-driven decline in fish stocks resulting in scarcity, unstable incomes, and heightened competition
- Loss of negotiating power as supply diminishes, increasing women's exposure to coercion, exploitation, and GBV
- Normalized GBV, sexual exploitation, and intimidation across fisheries spaces
- Exclusion from BMU leadership and decision-making structures
- Patriarchal governance systems that devalue women's role in the sector
- Unsafe working environments and fear of reporting abuse

NEEDS

- Robust safeguarding and reporting mechanisms
- Meaningful representation in BMU governance
- Access to finance, infrastructure, and cold storage
- Rights awareness and leadership capacity building
- Alternative and climate-resilient livelihoods

LESSONS LEARNT

- Climate change and environmental degradation are accelerating women's economic and social vulnerability
- Presence in the value chain does not equal power or protection
- Declining fish stocks directly weaken women's bargaining power and heighten exposure to exploitation
- Silence perpetuates abuse; collective voice enables accountability
- Rights-based advocacy is essential to sustainable and gender-just blue economy reform

RECOMMENDATIONS

1 Institutionalize Safeguarding Systems

Enforce zero-tolerance GBV policies within fisheries frameworks and deploy trained safeguarding officers at landing sites and BMUs, particularly in contexts where resource scarcity heightens risk of exploitation.

2 Guarantee Women's Equitable Participation in Governance

Mandate enforceable gender representation in BMU leadership and decision-making structures, enabling women to influence climate response, resource allocation, and market regulation decisions.

3 Invest in Climate-Resilient and Alternative Livelihoods

Prioritize diversified income options such as value addition, aquaculture, and sustainable enterprises to reduce dependency on dwindling fish stocks and minimize vulnerability to exploitative power dynamics.

4 Strengthen Accountability and Legal Redress

Integrate GBV response systems into fisheries governance, ensuring accessible reporting, legal aid, and survivor protection within county blue economy frameworks weakened by climate-induced scarcity.



CONCLUSION

Women fisherfolk are foundational to Mombasa's fisheries economy, yet climate change-induced decline in fish stocks has intensified their insecurity, weakened their negotiating power, and heightened their exposure to exploitation and gender-based violence. This climate-amplified vulnerability, combined with structural exclusion from decision-making, constitutes a critical governance and protection failure within the blue economy.

This advocacy brief calls upon policymakers, county governments, BMUs, and national agencies to act decisively, prioritizing safeguarding, equitable governance, and climate-resilient livelihood pathways as non-negotiable pillars of fisheries reform.

A sustainable blue economy cannot exist where women bear the burden of environmental collapse without power, protection, or voice. When women are protected, empowered, and heard, the tide turns not only for them, but for the future of Mombasa's blue economy.