INTRODUCTION

Women are mending nets in Sierra Leone, building boats in Somalia, and marketing goods across Africa’s coastal communities.¹ Defying traditional expectations, women are increasingly present at sea. To support this trend, the International Maritime Organization highlights the work of women in maritime spaces and aims to increase the number of women in industry trainings.² One Earth Future’s Stable Seas Maritime Security Index has been developed to identify the complexities of and relationships between maritime challenges. By employing a more interconnected approach, the Stable Seas Index illuminates the diversity of stakeholders, both men and women, involved in maritime security.

This brief highlights several vignettes developed through research on the Stable Seas Index, showcasing the vital roles of women in an area where many assume them to be absent—the maritime space.

The full and meaningful participation of women in the economy, political decision-making, and society is key to addressing maritime challenges. Women contribute directly to coastal stability while playing important roles in solutions to maritime crime. Women’s income goes directly to feeding their families and benefiting communities at a rate greater than men’s.³ Women strongly influence behavior and decision-making in their families and communities, and this role can be wielded to create positive change and prevent participation in criminal activity, such as piracy.⁴ Increases in gender equality contribute to more sustainable peace. In our “Gender Equality” vignette, we describe how women’s political representation is critical to peacebuilding and conflict prevention. Women’s participation in peace agreements increases, by more than a third, the likelihood of that agreement’s having lasting impact.⁵ Inversely, gender inequality is associated with increased corruption and violence.⁶ Gender inequality may also amplify grievances around resource allocation, thereby increasing maritime instability.⁷
Africa is making progress toward improving women’s participation in policy making. In the African Union, nineteen member countries have adopted national action plans. In Senegal, women’s representation in government has tripled since 2009. In The Gambia, Ghana, Guinea-Bissau, Namibia, and Nigeria, women hold half or more of the country’s high-level political positions.

However, women also disproportionately face challenges to their participation in maritime-based employment and economic prosperity. They encounter numerous legal and cultural obstacles, some of which are outlined in our “Women and Coastal Welfare” vignette. Fewer than one-third of the countries featured in the Stable Seas Maritime Security Index have laws against gender discrimination in hiring or mandate equal compensation. In our “Invisible Fishers” vignette, we describe how women in the Sierra Leonian fisheries sector face barriers to accessing credit. As a result, women remain underrepresented in maritime positions, from navies to fisheries management, and their salaries are typically lower than those of their male counterparts.

Maritime crime affects women in unique ways. Illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing reduces food and economic security, and women’s nutrition is most impacted when food is scarce. Illicit trade undermines economic security, and women are more likely to live in poverty. Trade in arms and drugs may facilitate or hide human trafficking. Women and girls may be trafficked to work aboard fishing vessels. Illicit trade undermines the rule of law, and women are disproportionately affected by this in their countries’ stockfisheries. They encounter numerous legal and cultural obstacles, which are often rooted in traditional practices that exclude women from decision-making processes.

As of 2016, nineteen members11 of the African Union had developed and adopted national action plans on women, peace, and security, including several of the top-ranking coastal states included in this analysis. The objective of these national action plans is the implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1325, which calls for increased participation and representation of women at all levels of decision-making in an effort to empower women to participate as equals in peacebuilding and the prevention of conflict. These agreements do not speak specifically to the role of women in improving maritime governance, but they are an important step toward formalizing women’s inclusion.

Several countries have improved women’s representation through new legislation and development-oriented partnerships with regional and global organizations. Senegal, for example, has been particularly successful at incorporating gender parity into its governance structures. Several of these countries have made significant strides in improving maritime governance, and women are more likely to hold high-level political positions in these countries. This has been particularly true of countries with strong political leadership, such as Senegal, where women have held ministerial-level positions since 2010. In The Gambia, Ghana, Guinea-Bissau, Namibia, and Nigeria, women have higher proportions of women in high-level political positions.12

As Sierra Leone emphasized in its national security strategy following its devastating civil war, poverty and a lack of social cohesion are national security threats that require civilian engagement to counter. To this end, Somalia is promoting women’s economic empowerment through a number of fisheries projects by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO). These projects include training women boat-builders and adding value to post-harvest fish catches. One community organizer working with the project notes, “It is important to have women involved in these activities since their contributions have a big influence on ensuring stronger household level financial management and food security that will directly benefit their families.”

— Ms. Shukri Ahmed Mohamed, community organizer with FAO Somalia

Programs like this, when coupled with equal property and business rights for women, can greatly expand women’s access to opportunities in coastal economies. Equal application of the rule of law across society is necessary for good governance. The rule of law can only help the region achieve peace and security and alleviate poverty.

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These differences in outcomes between men and women in business and the job market largely stem from the legal systems of their respective states. In sub-Saharan Africa in particular, women face multiple obstacles to equal participation in the economy.15

“Women today represent about 50 percent of the world’s population and, for the past two decades, about 50 percent of the labor force. Yet there are stark differences in the outcomes they achieve: women are only half as likely as men to have a full-time wage-earning job. The women who do have paid jobs earn as much as one-third less than men. Fewer than half of men are involved in trade or own registered companies. And women are more likely to work in low-productivity activities or informal employment.”

— Cecile Fruman, Author Why Gender Equality in Doing Business Makes Good Economic Sense16

Photo: Photo by Benilde Olofsson
In five out of thirty countries considered in the index, there are extra procedures for women to start a business compared to the procedures required for men. 
In seventeen out of thirty countries, equal remuneration for work of equal value is not legally mandated. 
In twenty-one out of thirty countries, nondiscrimination based on gender in hiring is not legally mandated. 
In eighteen out of thirty countries, women cannot work the same jobs as men. 
In two out of thirty countries, pregnant women may be dismissed from their occupations. 
In addition to unequal legal rights in terms of employment, women also face a lack of protection against different forms of violence: 
In seventeen out of thirty countries, there are no clear criminal penalties for domestic violence. 
In eight out of thirty countries, there is no legislation that addresses sexual harassment. 
In twenty out of thirty countries, marital rape is not criminalized.

Removing obstacles to women’s participation in the economy and establishing functioning regulatory frameworks to protect women from violence are key steps toward having inclusive, sustainable, and secure coastal economies and welfare.

“...The extent of the damage to the ocean is many decades shy of the impact of industrialisation on land, and there is still time, if we act now, to get the principles and the framework for the development of the ocean economy right. Business as usual is clearly not an option.” — The Economist Intelligence Unit Limited, 2015

Imagine a person who makes their living from fisheries. The picture is likely of a “fisherman” traveling out to sea in a boat to catch fish. However, the fisheries value chain consists of many important links, from the mending of nets to the drying of fish for sale, and women make up a large and vital portion of this sector. In fisheries, women comprise the majority of processing and post-harvest workers worldwide; the FAO estimates over 90 percent of workers in this sector are women.

Despite the vital roles women play in the fisheries value chain, fishing is most often perceived to be men’s work. Women’s work in the fisheries sector often goes unrecognized in research and by creditors, policy makers, and development programs, resulting in a lack of support for their work, lack of access to markets, and exclusion from fisheries management and policy decisions. This is problematic for women’s livelihoods and empowerment, and it distorts fisheries data and results in misinformed management measures. Women’s work in the fisheries sector must be understood and supported in order to advance gender equity, food security, and effective fisheries management.

In Sierra Leone, the fisheries sector provides substantial revenue and employment, supporting over 500,000 people. Around 85 percent of those employed in fisheries processing in the country are women. Women and men generally occupy complementary roles in the value chain. Men catch fish from canoes or work from shore in groups to pull in nets of fish. Once they come into port, they sell their catch to women who then perform the post-harvest activities, such as cleaning and drying the fish or bringing it directly to markets for sale. Much of the fish is obtained from family members, and most of the processing work is conducted within the home rather than in formal facilities.

Beyond post-harvest work, some women also catch fish directly, using nets to catch small fish in rivers and other small water bodies. Some women even lease boats and own fishing companies. The fisheries sector and processing in particular provide important livelihood opportunities for women. However, their incomes are still much lower than those of their male counterparts, and many women report struggling with other restrictive factors.

Mixed Migration

UNICEF estimates that 24 percent of global trafficking victims are children, but for sub-Saharan Africa this estimate rises to 64 percent. Children are often vulnerable following negotiations to transport them for work, education, or formal training in another city or country. Their parents are sometimes aware of the circumstances involved. Additionally, porous borders and lax regulatory environments allow for the trafficking of children to flourish.

In oil-rich Gabon and Equatorial Guinea, children are trafficked into the oil industry, domestic servitude, or the commercial sex trade. Many of these victims arrive by cramped boat from southern Nigeria. These migrations take several days, and there is a high risk of boats’ capsizing. Due to limited monitoring services, few statistics are available to prove exactly how many children begin and complete this journey.

In Gabon, girls are trafficked through middlepersons, including women called “aunties,” who facilitate opportunities for girls to work for wealthy African or European families. The risks of sexual abuse and forced child labor are severe. Often, girls fleeing situations of forced domestic labor fall into prostitution and pedophilia networks. Young girls from neighboring countries also run the risk of becoming child brides in Gabon. Boys who come to Gabon seeking work can be lured into unpaid and unsafe jobs or forced into street begging. Others are trafficked in the fishing sector, forced into dangerous jobs on the open sea.
Notes


12. Ibid.

13. FAO, “Promoting Gender in Fisheries Activities in Somalia.”


20. FAQ, “Promoting Gender in Fisheries Activities in Somalia.”


25. Ibid.


32. Ibid.