

Waiting at the Crossroads

Women in fisheries are bridging climate and biodiversity. Policy needs to catch up

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Women, in all their diversity, across coastal and fishing communities are already building collective responses to environmental change. The challenge now is whether environmental governance and financing systems are willing to recognise, support, and learn from that leadership

Why does coherence among environmental policies matter for coastal and fishing communities?

The climate and biodiversity crises have never been separate realities. Scientific evidence increasingly shows that climate change accelerates biodiversity loss, while ecosystem degradation further undermines climate resilience and adaptation capacities. These overlapping crises disproportionately affect communities whose livelihoods depend directly on ecosystems and natural resources, particularly coastal and small-scale fishing communities (IPBES, 2018; IPCC, 2022).

For many of these communities, environmental crises are experienced simultaneously through declining fish stocks, ecosystem degradation, extreme climate impacts, food insecurity, territorial pressures, and growing socioeconomic inequalities. Yet these impacts are not experienced equally. Existing gender inequalities shape how environmental change is lived, negotiated, and responded to – both within communities and through public policy.

Across coastal territories, women sustain livelihoods and local economies through harvesting, processing, trading, aquaculture, food preparation, and care work. They also contribute to biodiversity conservation, ecosystem stewardship, traditional knowledge transmission, and community resilience. Despite this, their labour and leadership remain systematically undervalued and underrecognised, even though they are essential.

At the same time, environmental governance often remains fragmented. Climate policies, biodiversity strategies, fisheries governance, marine conservation initiatives, and Blue Economy agendas are frequently designed and implemented separately, with limited coordination and insufficient attention to gender equality. As a result, women from coastal and fishing communities continue to confront governance systems that fail to respond to their needs, priorities, and lived experiences.

These are precisely the challenges that the *UNFCCC Gender Action Plan & CBD Gender Plan of Action: Synergies for implementation at national level* (CBD Women's Caucus & Women and Gender Constituency, 2026) briefing seeks to address. Using the Gender Plans of the Rio Conventions as a starting point, the briefing explores how stronger coordination

across environmental policies can support more coherent, gender-responsive, and lasting approaches for both people and planet.

Two Gender Plans with shared ambitions:

The existence of Gender Plans under both the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) is politically significant. For decades, gender equality was treated as a secondary or cross-cutting issue within environmental governance rather than as a core condition for effective and just implementation.

Today, both Conventions recognise that environmental action cannot succeed while ignoring structural inequalities and the differentiated impacts environmental crises have on women and girls, particularly those from structurally-excluded groups, including Indigenous Peoples, local communities, and people of African descent.

The UNFCCC Gender Action Plan seeks to advance gender-responsive climate action through strengthened participation, capacity-building, finance, implementation, and accountability. Similarly, the CBD Gender Plan of Action (Decision 15/11) supports gender-responsive implementation of global biodiversity goals through a human rights-based approach that emphasises women's rights to land and resources, participation and leadership, access to finance and information, and institutional transformation.

While developed through different international processes, the two Gender Plans share important priorities. Both emphasise the need for gender-responsive finance, stronger accountability systems, improved capacity-building, and better collection of sex-disaggregated and gender-responsive data. Both also recognise that gender equality, human rights, and environmental sustainability are deeply interconnected.

The joint briefing, developed by the CBD Women's Caucus and the UNFCCC Women and Gender Constituency, argues that these frameworks should not be treated as isolated agendas, but rather as complementary tools that can reinforce one another when implemented in a coordinated manner.

This is important at the national level, where governments are increasingly expected to simultaneously implement biodiversity, climate,



A local fisherwoman displaying some of the fish she and other members of the women's fishing group have caught in local waters and dried for sale in Atauro Island, Timor-Leste

development, and gender commitments. But it is even more important at local scale, because it is on the mari/territories that women already navigate the interconnected impacts of environmental crises and socio-economic inequalities in practice, even when institutions continue to address them separately.

Why does this matter for women from coastal and fishing communities?

These governance gaps are not abstract. They directly shape realities in coastal territories and fishing communities around the world. Marine protected areas, for example, are sometimes established without the meaningful participation of women from fishing communities, despite their important roles in local economies and ecosystem stewardship. Blue economy initiatives are often promoted as pathways for sustainable development while reproducing inequalities, concentrating access to resources, and marginalising small-scale fishers and fishworkers. Climate adaptation projects may focus narrowly on infrastructure or technical responses without recognising broader territorial, social, and biodiversity dimensions.

Across fisheries value chains, women's labour also remains persistently invisible.

Women are heavily involved in post-harvest activities, processing, trade, food provisioning, and community care work, yet much of this labour remains informal, unpaid, or poorly recognised in fisheries policies and economic accounting systems. This invisibilisation has direct consequences for access to decision-making, financing, social protection, and participation in environmental governance.

At the same time, women's organizations and grassroots networks continue to demonstrate that more integrated and community-centred approaches are already possible. Women in small-scale fisheries are not passive victims of environmental crises. Across many territories, women organize collective fisheries management systems, restore mangroves and coastal ecosystems, preserve and transmit traditional ecological knowledge, strengthen local food systems, mobilise community responses to environmental degradation and climate impacts, and stand at the frontlines defending territories and livelihoods.

These experiences challenge dominant narratives that frame women only as vulnerable populations without agency – rather than as political actors, knowledge holders, and leaders of environmental stewardship. This is one of the central critiques and opportunities raised in the joint briefing: women's organizations are strategic implementation partners and must be recognised and resourced as such. This requires moving beyond tokenistic participation towards meaningful inclusion in decision-making, financing, monitoring, and implementation processes at local, national, and international levels.

Towards more coherent and gender-just environmental governance:

Stronger coordination across environmental agreements must ultimately translate into better support, recognition, participation, financing, and rights for women and communities on the ground. Policy coherence should not be understood merely as institutional coordination between ministries or international agreements. It should also mean creating governance systems capable of responding to the realities, knowledge systems, and priorities of communities whose livelihoods depend directly on healthy ecosystems.

Women, in all their diversity, across coastal and fishing communities are already building collective responses to environmental change. The challenge now is whether environmental governance and financing systems are willing to recognise, support, and learn from that leadership. ■

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