

# **Advancing Women's Economic Empowerment in the Indian Ocean Region: Achievements, Challenges, and the Path Forward under IORA**

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Women's Economic Empowerment (WEE) has steadily evolved from a peripheral concern to a structural priority within the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA). Since 2013, IORA has recognised that sustainable development in the Indian Ocean region cannot be achieved without integrating women fully into economic life. In a region marked by demographic diversity, uneven development, maritime interdependence, and varying levels of institutional capacity, the elevation of WEE to a strategic objective represents both a normative shift and a governance innovation.

The adoption of the Second IORA Action Plan (2022–2027) confirms that gender equality is not treated as an isolated social objective but as a cross-cutting driver of regional prosperity. By explicitly linking women's rights, economic participation, leadership opportunities, and the elimination of violence and discrimination, IORA acknowledges that economic empowerment is inseparable from structural equality. The Action Plan's language reflects an understanding that economic marginalisation of women constrains not only individual agency but also regional productivity and resilience.

A major institutional achievement in operationalising this vision was the establishment of the Working Group on Women's Economic Empowerment (WGWEE) through the 2017 Jakarta Concord. The creation of a dedicated working group transformed political commitment into institutional practice. Unlike declaratory regional statements that often lack follow-through, the WGWEE provides a structured mechanism for coordination, monitoring, and policy exchange. Its mandate was further clarified during the inaugural Ministerial Conference on WEE in Balaclava, Mauritius, in 2018, where Member States adopted formal Terms of Reference. This institutional consolidation marked a critical turning point: WEE became embedded within IORA's governance architecture.

One of IORA's most notable achievements lies in its inclusive design. The WGWEE's composition extends beyond government ministries to include civil society actors, private sector representatives,

and other stakeholders. This multi-sectoral approach recognises that economic empowerment cannot be delivered solely through legislative reform. Access to finance, entrepreneurship development, participation in maritime industries, digital literacy, and market integration require partnerships between states, businesses, and grassroots actors. By convening senior officials at least twice annually and requiring reporting to the Committee of Senior Officials, the WGWE introduces a degree of accountability and policy continuity rarely achieved in regional forums.

Another significant success has been the mainstreaming of WEE across IORA's thematic pillars, including the blue economy, trade facilitation, and sustainable development. Women's participation in fisheries, coastal management, tourism, and maritime trade has increasingly entered regional discourse. In many Indian Ocean states, women constitute a substantial proportion of informal sector workers and small-scale traders. By framing WEE as integral to economic resilience, IORA aligns gender equality with growth strategies rather than positioning it as a competing agenda.

The rotating leadership model of the WGWE has also reinforced shared ownership. The current 2024–2025 mandate, under which the Islamic Republic of Iran serves as both Coordinating Country and Chair, illustrates that leadership in advancing WEE is distributed across the region's diverse membership. This rotational approach mitigates perceptions of regional imbalance and encourages Member States to internalise gender-responsive economic policies within their domestic frameworks.

Despite notable progress, Women's Economic Empowerment under IORA faces persistent challenges. Implementation gaps arise from uneven domestic political will, funding, and institutional capacity across diverse member economies. Deep-rooted socio-cultural norms continue to restrict women's access to property, finance, and leadership. Inconsistent sex-disaggregated data hampers effective monitoring and evaluation. Additionally, geopolitical tensions and competing regional priorities risk sidelining gender equality unless it remains firmly integrated within broader economic and strategic cooperation frameworks.

Nevertheless, the successes of IORA's WEE initiative should not be understated. The mere institutionalisation of a dedicated working group, the integration of gender objectives into strategic planning, and the establishment of structured reporting processes represent substantive governance advancements. Compared to many regional organisations where gender equality remains rhetorical, IORA has created operational channels for dialogue, policy diffusion, and peer learning.

Looking forward, the next phase of WEE under IORA should focus on three priorities: measurable impact, resource mobilisation, and intersectionality. Developing region-wide indicators for women's economic participation would strengthen monitoring. Mobilising partnerships with

financial institutions and development agencies could expand access to credit and digital tools for women entrepreneurs. Finally, recognising the intersecting vulnerabilities of rural women, migrant workers, and women in maritime sectors would ensure that empowerment strategies are inclusive and context-sensitive.

In sum, Women's Economic Empowerment under IORA reflects both progress and potential. The region has moved from declaratory commitments to institutional mechanisms. Yet the transformative promise of WEE will ultimately depend on bridging the gap between regional coordination and domestic implementation. If sustained political will, adequate resources, and robust monitoring accompany the existing framework, IORA's approach could serve as a model for integrating gender equality into regional economic governance across the Global South.