

Women & The Indian Ocean

How climate change disproportionately impacts women across the Indian Ocean region



science, technology
& innovation

Department:
Science, Technology and Innovation
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA



Sea-level rise · Fisheries collapse · Coastal erosion · Displacement

A rapidly warming sea

4.34 mm/yr

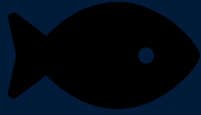
Sea-level rise rate since
2010
(4× the 1990s rate)

220–250

Marine heatwave
days/year
projected (up from 20)

50 M+

Coastal residents facing
heightened risk



Women & Fisheries

Western Indian Ocean
Small-Scale Fisheries

The Invisible Workforce

1. Women dominate fish processing, trading and post-harvest — the lowest-paid, least secure roles
2. When fish stocks decline, women's unpaid labour in processing increases, not decreases
3. In Zanzibar & coastal Tanzania, women face a 'triple burden': income work, household duties & social obligations
4. When seaweed farming becomes profitable, men displace women from activities they pioneered
5. Lack of gender-disaggregated data renders women's contributions practically invisible in policy

Invisible in Policy, Exposed to Risk

Despite bearing the heaviest burden, women remain systematically excluded from ocean governance and climate adaptation policy in the Indian Ocean region.

- ✘ **DATA GAP:** No gender-disaggregated data means women's contributions and losses are not measured — and what isn't measured isn't funded.
- ✘ **POLICY BLINDNESS:** Climate adaptation programmes are routinely designed without consulting women fisherfolk, especially those from developing Indian Ocean states.
- ✘ **GOVERNANCE EXCLUSION:** Women are under-represented in fisheries management bodies, Blue Economy councils, and national climate NDC processes across the IOR.
- ✔ **WHAT WORKS:** Gender-responsive adaptation — including women in management, collecting sex-disaggregated data, and securing land/tenure rights — measurably improves resilience.

When the ocean takes your home

East Africa & Mozambique

At least 750,000 people will be displaced from East African coasts between 2020–2050. Mozambique, Tanzania & Madagascar are particularly vulnerable — cyclone intensity is rising with warmer sea-surface temperatures.

Cyclones Idai, Eloise & Freddy have collectively displaced millions.

Small Island States

Madagascar, Mauritius, Seychelles & the Maldives face existential threats.

Women — especially those in female-headed households — lose homes, livelihoods, and safety simultaneously when displacement occurs.

Mobility constraints mean women are last to leave and least able to rebuild.

The Triple Burden

Why women cannot simply "adapt" to climate change

1 Income Work

Fishing, processing, trading — all impacted by declining stocks and extreme weather events

2 Household Duties

Food provision, water collection, childcare — increase when livelihoods collapse

3 Social Obligations

Community & kinship responsibilities that cannot be abandoned, limiting mobility & planning

*"The triple burden that women face are major agency constraints for long-term planning and adaptation."
— Frontiers in Marine Science, Zanzibar Study (2022)*

From Frontline to Centre Stage

Women are not just victims of Indian Ocean climate change — they are its most exposed frontline, and its most under-used source of solutions.

Count women's work · Include women in governance · Fund gender-responsive adaptation · Protect tenure & mobility rights

SDG 14 (Life Below Water) cannot be achieved without SDG 5 (Gender Equality)



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