

Women's Economic Empowerment in the Indian Ocean Region: Why Grassroots Action Must Drive Regional Commitments

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Women's economic empowerment has increasingly become a cornerstone of sustainable development, inclusive growth and social resilience. Across the Indian Ocean Region, women play indispensable roles in agriculture, fisheries, tourism, small-scale enterprises and the informal economy. Yet, despite their significant economic contributions, many continue to face structural barriers, including limited access to finance, unequal participation in decision-making, inadequate business training and restrictive social norms. Recognising these challenges, the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) adopted Women's Economic Empowerment (WEE) as a Cross-Cutting Issue in 2013 and has since incorporated it into the IORA Action Plan 2022–2027. Through the Working Group on Women's Economic Empowerment (WGWEE), IORA has committed itself to improving financial inclusion, supporting women entrepreneurs, mainstreaming gender across its priority areas and promoting research and capacity-building initiatives. While these regional commitments are commendable, their long-term success will ultimately depend on one critical factor: the ability to translate policy objectives into grassroots action that empowers women where they live and work.

Regional frameworks often establish ambitious goals, but economic empowerment cannot be achieved solely through declarations, work plans or international meetings. The realities experienced by women in coastal villages, rural communities and urban informal settlements vary significantly across the Indian Ocean Region. Policies designed at the regional level may not adequately address local social, cultural and economic circumstances unless communities themselves are involved in identifying priorities and shaping solutions. This is why grassroots policymaking should become an integral component of women's economic empowerment. Women must not only be the beneficiaries of development initiatives but also active participants in designing, implementing and evaluating them.

Mauritius offers valuable lessons in this regard. As a Small Island Developing State (SIDS), the country has made considerable progress in promoting gender equality through legislation, education and entrepreneurship support programmes. Nevertheless, important challenges remain. Women

continue to be underrepresented in certain sectors, particularly within higher-value industries and senior decision-making positions. Many women entrepreneurs operate small businesses with limited access to capital, markets and digital technologies. Rural women, fisherwomen and home-based producers frequently encounter additional barriers that national policies may overlook. These realities demonstrate that broad national strategies require stronger local implementation mechanisms capable of responding to community-specific needs.

Grassroots organisations have a unique advantage because they understand the daily realities faced by women within their communities. Women's associations, cooperatives, village councils, community-based organisations and local non-governmental organisations are often better positioned than central institutions to identify practical obstacles and deliver targeted support. Rather than relying exclusively on top-down programmes, governments should invest in strengthening these local institutions so they can become effective partners in economic development. Empowering grassroots organisations also builds trust between communities and public institutions while encouraging greater participation in decision-making processes.

Access to finance illustrates why local approaches are so important. IORA's emphasis on improving women's financial inclusion is both necessary and timely. However, financial inclusion involves much more than opening bank accounts or expanding access to credit. Many women require financial literacy training, mentoring, business development services and confidence-building before they are able to utilise financial products effectively. Community-based organisations can deliver these services in culturally appropriate ways while maintaining close relationships with women entrepreneurs throughout their business journeys. Such personalised support is difficult to achieve through national programmes alone.

Similarly, entrepreneurship training should be adapted to local economic opportunities. Women living in coastal communities may benefit from training in sustainable fisheries, seafood processing, eco-tourism or marine conservation enterprises. Others may require support in agriculture, digital commerce, handicrafts or creative industries depending on the characteristics of their local economies. Grassroots institutions are well placed to identify these opportunities because they possess intimate knowledge of local markets, resources and community needs. Tailoring capacity-building initiatives to local realities increases the likelihood that women will establish sustainable businesses capable of generating long-term income.

Grassroots policymaking also promotes more inclusive leadership. Economic empowerment should not be measured solely by increases in income but also by women's participation in decisions that affect their lives. When women are represented within local councils, cooperatives, producer

organisations and community development committees, they gain practical leadership experience while ensuring that policies reflect their lived experiences. This bottom-up approach complements IORA's objective of mainstreaming gender considerations across all priority areas and creates a stronger foundation for inclusive governance throughout the region.

Regional cooperation remains essential, but its effectiveness depends upon meaningful local ownership. The Working Group on Women's Economic Empowerment provides an important platform for Member States to exchange experiences, develop collaborative initiatives and promote best practices. However, future regional programmes should place greater emphasis on supporting grassroots organisations through technical assistance, small grants, leadership training and regional networking opportunities. Connecting women's cooperatives and community organisations across IORA Member States would facilitate the exchange of practical knowledge and innovative solutions while strengthening regional solidarity.

Ultimately, women's economic empowerment cannot be imposed from the top. Sustainable change occurs when women possess the knowledge, resources, confidence and institutional support needed to improve their own economic circumstances. Regional frameworks such as the IORA Action Plan 2022–2027 establish an important vision, but that vision will only become reality when it is translated into practical action within villages, towns and local communities. Governments should therefore move beyond viewing grassroots organisations merely as implementing partners and instead recognise them as co-creators of policy and development.

The future of women's economic empowerment in the Indian Ocean Region lies in bridging regional ambition with local action. By investing in grassroots institutions, promoting participatory policymaking and strengthening community leadership, IORA Member States can ensure that empowerment is not confined to policy documents but becomes a lived reality for women across diverse economic and social contexts. In doing so, the region will not only advance gender equality but also unlock the full economic potential of millions of women whose contributions are indispensable to sustainable and inclusive development.