

**ADVANCING GENDER EQUALITY IN AQUATIC BIODIVERSITY
CONSERVATION THROUGH THE CONTINENTAL GENDER STRATEGY ON
AQUATIC BIODIVERSITY CONSERVATION: ALIGNING WITH THE
INTERNATIONAL YEAR OF THE WOMAN FARMER (IYWF 2026)**

Stephanie Achieng^{1*}, Hellen Guebama² and Mohamed Sesay³

¹Gender Policy and Strategy Expert, Aquatic Environmental Management, AU-IBAR

²Fisheries Officer, AU-IBAR

³Senior Blue Economy Expert, AU-IBAR

*stephanie.achieng@au-ibar.org

The upcoming International Year of the Woman Farmer (IYWF 2026) presents a unique platform to spotlight the critical role of women in natural resource management, particularly in aquatic biodiversity conservation. This presentation will showcase the African Union InterAfrican Bureau for Animal Resources (AU-IBAR) Continental Gender Strategy for Mainstreaming Gender in Aquatic Biodiversity Conservation and Environmental Management in Africa.

In Africa, women constitute a significant portion of the aquaculture workforce, particularly in post-harvest roles like processing and marketing, with millions employed continent-wide. In specific programs, women represent 25-60% of fish farmers in Ghana, 50% of aquaculture beneficiaries in Tanzania, and a notable share in Zambia, where they also contribute to conservation efforts. Globally, women account for 40% of the aquatic value chain, with 24% in fish farming (The State of World Fisheries and Aquaculture - FAO, 2024) though cultural barriers and limited data obscure their full impact in conservation.

In that regard, the continental gender strategy provides a transformative framework for enhancing the visibility, participation, and empowerment of women across the aquatic value chains, from small-scale fisheries, including octopus fisheries and aquaculture to coastal and marine resource governance. It is underpinned by the Africa Union's Africa Blue Economy Strategy (ABES), Policy Framework and Reform Strategy on Fisheries and Aquaculture (PFRS), the Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Strategy (CAADP) Kampala Declaration on inclusivity in the aquatic food systems and the African Union Agenda 2063.

The presentation will outline the Strategy's core pillars, including gender-responsive policy development/ reform, capacity building, stakeholder engagement and research and development. It will also highlight progress made through African Union Member States in aligning national priorities and actions with the strategy, as well as lessons learned from pilot implementation across the 5 regions of Africa. Recently, a continental gender implementation plan was developed to operationalize the continental strategy for mainstreaming gender in aquatic biodiversity conservation in African Union Member States.

Framed within the context of IYWF 2026 and the GAF 9 conference theme of advancing gender equality in aquatic food systems, this contribution emphasizes the need for stronger policy coherence, increased investment, and multi-stakeholder collaboration to break systemic barriers and promote gender-transformative actions.

By sharing Africa's continental approach, the session aims to foster dialogue, build synergies with global gender strategies, and encourage cross-regional learning on inclusive and sustainable aquatic biodiversity management.