



Women in ocean-based activities in Mauritius and the Seychelles



Volume 3 - Issue 06 - 03/2023

GENDERED VOICES

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Introduction

This edition of the Gendered Voices Newsletter highlights the opportunities and challenges faced by women in ocean-based activities, and more precisely in the Blue Economy sectors of Mauritius and Seychelles, respectively. Through the stories of Ms. Dainise Quatre, marine officer; Ms. Doline Rose, oyster farmer; Ms. Andrese Flore, fisher, and Ms. Priteema Laverdure, coral planter, interesting insights are provided on the ways in which some women are earning a living from the sea. This edition also highlights the contributions of women to building resilience and adaptation measures to climate change, and addresses gender-related issues that remain to be tackled in ocean-related sectors.



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Ahunna Eziakonwa

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Date: 02 March 2023



Women in ocean-based activities in Mauritius and the Seychelles.

Spreading over 71 per cent of our planet, oceans are our most significant natural resources and, arguably, the least prominent in our combat to preserve natural sanctuaries. The degradation they face is however amongst the most acute: decimated fish stocks, pollution, acidification, evaporation... Today, 12 per cent of the global population depend on oceans, seas and marine resources to survive. Entire communities in Africa are suffering the impact of unsustainable practices they have little or no responsibility in, and which threaten to sever ancestral bonds between human and nature.

In Africa, women have a special connection with nature. They often are the under-recognised drivers of nature-based livelihoods and the protectors of ecosystems that have provided for their families for countless generations. Nowhere can the vital relationship between women and oceans be better exemplified than in Mauritius.

During my visit to the island, last December, I had the privilege to share moments in the lives of these women. Whether they are seashell farmers, innovators, sustainable business holders, activists, or policymakers – despite sociocultural and economic challenges, they all share a remarkable dedication to the conservation of our common heritage. Their achievements are no simple deeds and they have overcome mountains to realise their dreams and act upon their deepest belief.

At a time when the world is facing its biggest crisis – a growing self-destruction caused by unsustainable consumption – these women remind us of the importance of being rooted in the nature that surrounds us and of caring for the planet that hosts our humanity. I vividly remember meeting Doline Rose, who is an oyster farmer living on the eastern coast of Mauritius. She proudly explained that women in Mauritius were stronger than society usually portrays. Her testimony is that of daily struggles to earn a livelihood from the ocean and to protect our existence and our future.

In this edition of Gendered Voices, you will discover the stories of some of Mauritius' strongest women who have propelled nature-based solutions to the next level, fostering inclusive and sustainable growth for their communities. They set examples for the country, the continent and the world.

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Covering 71% of the Earth's surface, oceans are home to an extensive ecosystem of marine life. They also generate half of the oxygen humans breathe and absorb 50 times more carbon dioxide than the atmosphere¹, thus playing a pivotal role in mitigating climate change effects. Oceans, which include the Atlantic, Pacific, Indian, Arctic and Antarctic oceans, act as thermostats regulating the Earth's temperature, and support a large portion of the planet's biodiversity. Bordering the oceans, coastal ecosystems harbor a wide diversity of marine species and benefit humans too by allowing numerous ocean-oriented activities that contribute to livelihoods, entertainment, cultural, and economic development².

In recognition of the paramount importance of the oceans and the urgent need to reverse marine degradation, SDG 14 (Life below Water) of the UN Agenda 2030 stipulates the conservation and sustainable use of the oceans, seas, and marine resources, particularly in the framework of blue economy's development worldwide³.

Located in the southwest Indian Ocean, Mauritius claims an Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) of 2.3 million km², with an additional expanse of continental shelf area of 400,000 km², which is co-managed with the Seychelles. Comprising of 115 islands, the Seychelles archipelago also has a large EEZ that spreads over 1.37 million km².⁵ For both these Small Island Developing States (SIDS), the ocean represents a significant economic pillar. Predictably, blue economy activities encompassing coastal tourism, fishing, seafood processing and seaport activities are common to both SIDS. Excluding coastal tourism, these activities constitute 10% of Mauritius' GDP and employ around 7,000 people⁶.

In a bid to influence ocean governance and align marine development projects with the Sustainable Development Goals, the UNDP multi-country office for Mauritius and Seychelles has rolled out several projects to build and enhance ocean and coastal

resilience. In 2017, the GEF-funded Sapphire Joint Management Area Project was launched to assist Mauritius and Seychelles in the long-term management of their shared EEZ, which is the world's largest co-managed underwater area. Additionally, in 2020, the UNDP launched the 'Restoring Marine Ecosystem Services by Rehabilitating Coral Reefs to Meet a Changing Climate Future' project in both Mauritius and Seychelles. Funded by the Adaptation Fund (AF), the 6-year project seeks to alleviate the impacts of climate change on coral-reef dependent economic sectors; restore coral reefs damaged by coral bleaching, and improve the livelihoods of local communities, including women⁷. Another prominent project supported by the UNDP is the 'Supporting the Economic Empowerment of the Artisanal Fishing Community of the Republic of Mauritius' project, which seeks to promote artisanal and sustainable fisheries practices⁸.

According to UNCTAD, SDG 14 (Life below Water) is not only quintessential for the sustainable development of blue economies, but it also addresses cross-cutting SDGs related to poverty, hunger, education, gender equality and health. Though the female workforce in tourism and fisheries is equal or even higher than male contribution in many countries, women tend to be over-represented in the lowest rungs of these lucrative sectors⁹. In Small Island Developing States, the participation of women can be as high as 54% in tourism (30%-80% of total exports), but they are mostly concentrated in lowest-paid, low-skilled and least-protected jobs. Regarding fisheries and aquaculture sectors, women's contributions remain overlooked or undervalued, notwithstanding their vital role in ensuring food supply chain from the ocean to table on which nearly 3 billion people depend for their daily source of protein¹⁰.

According to Statistics Mauritius, in 2021, 10,203 women were employed in tourism compared to 17,086 men. A higher female labour participation was recorded in the fisheries sector where 1,733 women were employed compared to 1,388 men¹¹.

A great passion for marine conservation

Passionate about the environment, Ms. Dainise Quatre began her career journey in conservation in 2013 as a Conservation Ranger on the pristine Vallée de Mai Nature Reserve, a UNESCO World Heritage Site on the island of Praslin in the Seychelles. Today, she works as Marine officer at the Seychelles Parks and Garden Authority (SPGA), an institution which is responsible for the marine and terrestrial national parks and gardens of Seychelles.

“Growing up, I was very fascinated and intrigued by nature, especially by the mystifying underwater world. Besides the enthralling marine documentaries, the rich fauna and flora of the Seychelles were and still are indubitably my utmost source of inspiration. I was drawn to wildlife conservation and environmental causes when I realized the role that nature played in sustaining our livelihoods and country’s economy. Without its natural treasures and beauties, the island would be doomed and tourism drastically curtailed.”

During my teenage years, I joined and volunteered for an environment movement group. After completing high school at 18 years old, I took up several roles in conservation and worked on a couple of nature reserves across Seychelles. Following Vallée de Mai, I was posted to Aldabra Island, which is one of the Outer Islands of Seychelles, mostly renowned for turtle nesting.

When I joined SPGA as a marine park ranger, I was mum to a 3 months old baby. I was quite surprised that I was bestowed the job and entrusted to handle both my role as a young and new mother and an ambitious professional, especially in the tough arena of conservation. At the time, we were only two women in the male-dominated discipline. The other lady was operating on La Digue and me in Mahé, the capital.

The early days were plagued with sexist comments and unconscious bias vis-à-vis me as a woman and new mother working in conservation – not a reality that any man with a 3 month old toddler would have had to face. Some of my male colleagues underestimated my

potential and commented that conservation is a man’s job. Referring to my tasks as a marine park ranger, they opined that the job was highly demanding, requiring everlastingly long hours at sea and that I would not be able to cope. I proved them all wrong. I persevered and even got promoted to Marine Officer!”

When Ms. Quatre joined the SPGA, the organisation encouraged and supported her to further her tertiary studies. She was granted a scholarship in Environmental Sciences at the University of Seychelles. Today, she aspires to enroll in a master’s degree to study natural resource management.

“Becoming well versed in natural resource management is a way for me to improve the state of knowledge on this subject in the Seychelles and thus to contribute to better decision making in line with sustainable management of our natural resources. Sometimes, political decisions are shortsighted, and this may exacerbate the adverse impacts of climate change in the country. For instance, building hotels on coastal areas prone to erosion is not sustainable and forward thinking. We must really put sustainable development and the conscientious management of our terrestrial and marine resources at the heart of any development project or national plan.”

SPGA being one of the main partners of the Ridge to Reef Project in the Seychelles, Ms. Quatre was appointed as the Project Coordinator. The five-year long UNDP Mauritius and Seychelles funded project focuses on conserving, restoring, rejuvenating, and rehabilitating terrestrial and marine areas with damaged or fragile ecosystems.

“In Seychelles, the number of women in environmental conservation and activism overshoots that of men.



I believe that women here are very independent, forthright, and inherent fighters! Recently, women have been at the forefront of protests, petitioning against a detrimental hotel development plan.

The blue economy has the potential to catapult Seychelles onto an entirely new development trajectory and unlock vast opportunities for its people – and women must not be excluded from such economic prospects and benefits!”

“Women, specifically, have a pivotal role to play in the emergence of a sustainable ocean economy, as they have an innate passion and sensitivity vis-à-vis nature and environmental conservation, in addition to their indigenous knowledge.”





Economic aspirations in oyster farming

Born and raised in a family and community of fishers, Ms. Doline Rose demonstrates great interest in oyster farming. Residing in Poste de Flacq, on the eastern coast of Mauritius, the senior citizen took over the family oyster business after the passing of her father, and today she is determined to expand her business, alongside with other female oyster farmers of the region.

"I ventured in oyster harvesting about 20 years ago. My grandfather, father, even mother, were committed fishers and oyster harvesters. My husband is also a fisherman. Oyster picking has, for years, allowed me to make substantial household contributions and fund my children's schooling. Unlike my husband who holds an official fisherman card; we, oyster farmers, are not recognized as

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Women are stronger than portrayed by society. We can achieve beyond expectations if given the chance, recognition, and tailored support to meet our needs.

fisher persons, and thus, we do not receive any compensation during bad weather conditions and the fishing closure season.

"I usually pick oysters at low tide and when the weather is fine. To maintain their freshness until I receive orders and can sell them, I used to keep the oysters in a secluded spot in the sea. However, due to thefts at sea, I now only pick oysters when I have pre-orders and deliver them right away. Oyster harvesting can entail certain risks such as unforeseen bad weather conditions, stings by stonefish, or other hazardous injuries. Once, while picking an oyster, the shell cracked and a piece pricked my eye. Fortunately, it was not a serious wound and I recovered fast".

For Ms. Rose, being well equipped and appropriately dressed with hats, long protective garments and boots are indispensable to eschew injuries. Owning a boat, she is able to reach the oyster hotspots fast. At other times, she threads her way on foot, along with other oyster farmers. On average, she picks around 200 oysters per day.

"I do not have direct contracts with hotels or restaurants and sell my oysters to a retailer who owns a barachois. Depending on the size, the oysters are sold at a nominal price compared to market price. Considering the great potential of oyster farming and its growing popularity in Mauritius; together with other female oyster farmers, we hope to own our own barachois as part of a broader initiative that entails launching a cooperative.

Last year, around 20 women, including myself, enrolled in an Oyster farming programme initiated by the United Nations Development Programme. The goal of the 18-month long programme is to impart us with key knowledge on oysters, and ways to hone our skills and scale up our marine economic activity. Following the course, we hope to implement what we have been taught and to launch a cooperative. We will also resume our plea to the authorities to be recognised as fisher people and obtain our due fisher person cards!"

Funded by the UNDP GEF Small Grants Programme, the 'Empowering Coastal Communities through Native Oyster Aquaculture' project seeks to



reinforce the capacity of cohorts of women from coastal communities to effectively contribute to and leverage the development of the aquaculture sector and food security.

"The COVID-19 context has particularly disrupted my livelihood and that of other fisher families. My family had become very dependent on my husband's government allowance, and it became clear to me and to many other fellow female oyster farmers that we, oyster pickers, would continue to be penalized without the fisher person card.

Having to head out to sea at 5.30 at low tide is not easy. But I thoroughly enjoy it! This has been the life of my forefathers and now mine. This is the only life that I know, and I embrace it fully. We, ocean people, must ensure that our passion, tradition, skills, and artisanal practices are maintained. My children are also interested in the job, and I hope that the evolution of oyster farming will be fruitful for the future generations, especially young women.

I commend the UNDP for targeting women. For way too long, women's contributions to the development of marine activities have been omitted. I am certain that if more projects like that of the UNDP come along, women will find their due place in the blue economy and beyond."

Being a fisher and a single mother

Ms. Andrese Flore resides in Rodrigues with her two teenage children. She has been a fisher for a long time and epitomizes the strength and vehemence of countless single mothers beset by challenges from all fronts, striving to sustain their household and family livelihood.

“I was very young when I began fishing. At the time, I would only fish in the lagoon. The first time that I went off the lagoon on a boat to fish, I was seventeen. It was a mesmerizing and life changing experience. I did not have a boat back then, so I went to fish with other fishers. It was only in 2008 that I got my own boat.”

Depending on tides, I normally wake up at 2 am to attend to household chores and food preparation for my children and animals, before setting off around 3 am to reach the beach at 3:30. Two other fishers join me on fishing expeditions, and this is particularly helpful as we share fuel and oil costs. During daytime, we usually catch lagoon fish such as ‘Viel’ or ‘Viel Rouge’ or open water fish such as ‘Kaya’, ‘Cateau’ and ‘Madame Tomber’. In favorable conditions, we venture at night around 11 pm to catch ‘Capitaines’, ‘Beris’, ‘Tunas’ and ‘Carangues’.

Being at sea can be risky. When the sea becomes rough and we are already out in the deep sea at night, we must wait until morning in an area called ‘Emba Zil’ where there is small atoll that shields us from winds and waves. Sometimes, the formation of fog after rain also prevents us from going back to shore, lest we hit the reef. So, we must wait. At times, we come back empty handed or with just enough to make a curry for our own consumption, and other times we get more fish than expected.

I have tried several times to formally register to get a fisher person card, but to no avail. It baffles me that some fishers get granted fisher person cards when they barely go fishing. Once when I enquired why I was not granted the card, a high-profile man in fisheries asked me if I even knew how to prepare a bait! It seemed that

it did not matter to him that I had a boat and had been fishing for years.”

When weather conditions prohibit fishing, Ms. Flore struggles financially. In such hard times, having a fisher person card would have allowed some form of compensation, let alone buying enough life jackets. She also spoke about the difficulties of raising two children alone, without any allowance from the father – a foreigner who has been going back and forth to Rodrigues before withdrawing completely from their lives.

“This is a gender issue that many women face, but no one dares to talk about it. Although I am not against tourism, I must denounce the fact that some women of the island have been exploited by male tourists. There is a form of power dynamics at play. Some tourists may feel like they are in a position of power and superiority compared to island women. This can lead to manipulation, exploitation and, as in my case, single motherhood, and financial burden. Targeted policies are needed to protect island people in this kind of situation.”

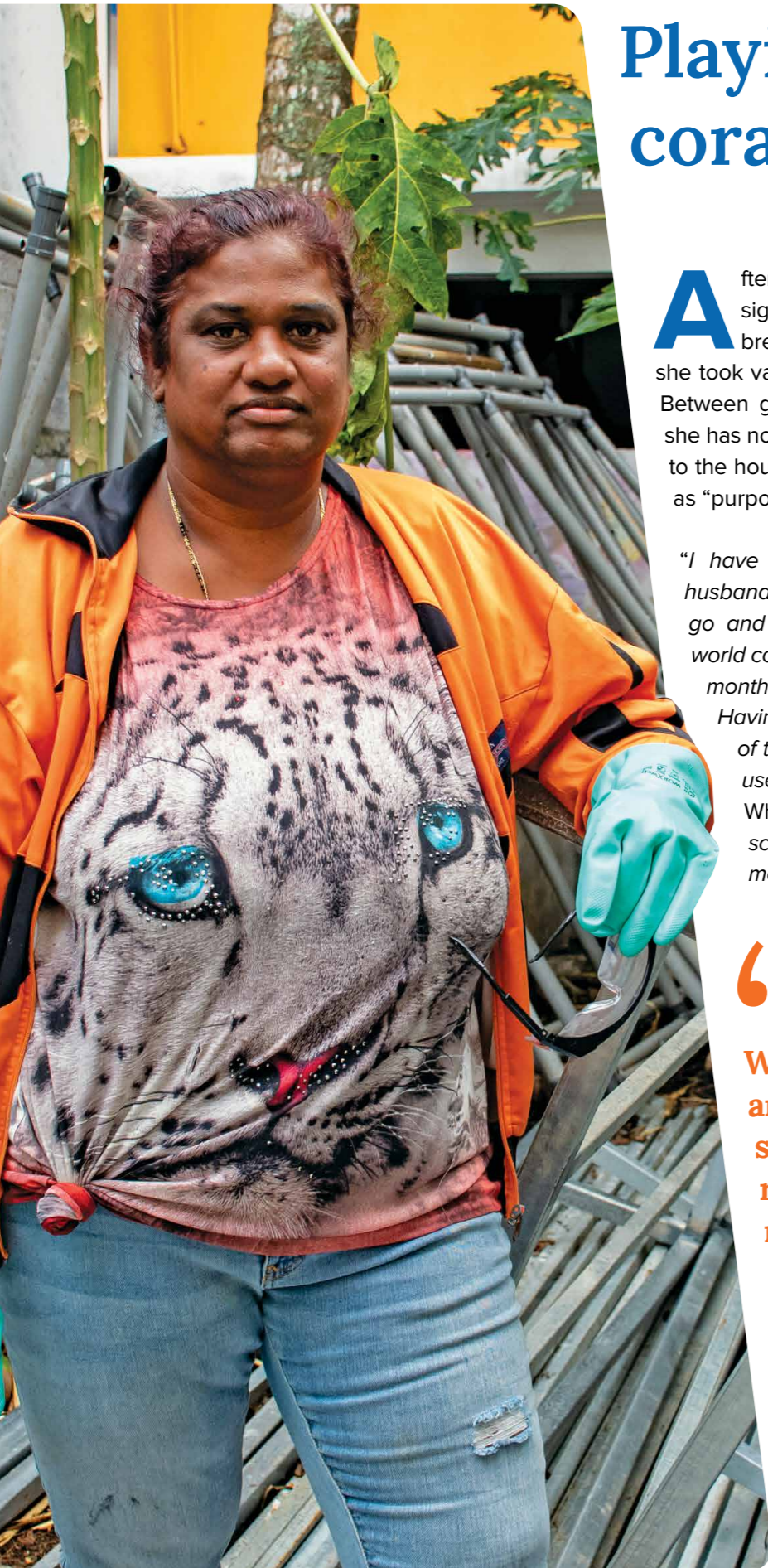
“Shortly after the man deserted, I moved into my mother’s house to cut rental outlays. Her corrugated iron-made home leaks and is not comfortable, but we adapt. To sustain our livelihood and household finances, I had to find other alternative means of income and adhere to subsistence farming. For instance, I raise pigs (which I sometimes sell), poultry, goats and cultivate crops such as corn, sweet potato, manioc, carrots etc. for our own use and to feed the animals. During COVID-19, I had 24 pigs, half of which died as I did not have enough food to feed them all as I was not allowed to work and neither did I receive any fisher compensation with which I could have bought food for the animals, amongst other necessities. Chronic drought in Rodrigues is also a huge problem. Currently there is no rain, so we barely have any water. All my crops are withered.”

According to Ms. Flore, the only access to water that her community currently has is a nearby well, but it does not suffice for everybody.

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As I am a strong and determined person, I will keep on finding new ways of surviving and providing for my family. In times of crises, women have the capacity to adapt and build resilience.





Playing a role in coral restoration

After a work accident that cost her husband his sight, Ms. Priteema Laverdure became the sole breadwinner for her family. A mother of three, she took various temporary jobs to support her family. Between gardening, housekeeping, and selling 'roti', she has now found a new job that not only contributes to the household's finances, but which she describes as "purposeful" – coral plantation.

"I have always been proactive. Even when my husband used to be the only one working, I would go and help him. After he lost his eyesight, our world collapsed. The pension that he receives every month is not adequate to raise a family of five. Having taken a loan prior to the accident, most of the compensation that he had received was used for the repayment. I resolved to take a job. When I first heard about the coral plantation scheme, I hesitated but my family encouraged me to give it a try."

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We, coastal communities, are highly dependent on the sea. Women, like myself, are ready to do what it takes to restore and preserve our environment and ocean!

Today, I am proud to be part of the ECO-SUD team of coral planters! Growing up on the coast, I have witnessed the overt degradation of our ocean and severe depletion of aquatic life. At extreme low tides, we used to contemplate the sight of preponderant corals, but today most of them have disappeared. I think that the coral restoration project is unequivocally indispensable to reverse the damage and we are already seeing great results!"

Supported by the UNDP in collaboration with the Albion Fisheries Research Centre (AFRC) and the Mauritius Oceanography Institute under the aegis of the Ministry of Blue Economy, Marine Resources, Fisheries and Shipping, the 'Coral Reef Restoration Project' is currently being implemented by 2 NGOs namely ECO-SUD and Reef Conservation. Spanning over five years, the project seeks to restore 3.2 ha of coral populations in the Blue Bay Marine Protected Area. From education about ways to mitigate harmful effects on the environment, to growing, transplanting, and rebuilding coral and reef systems, the project also aims to create jobs and promote alternative livelihoods for coastal residents, especially those impacted by the Wakashio oil spill in 2020.

"Prior to signing the contract, we completed a 6-day training course which entailed learning how to swim and snorkel. It was very motivating and at least 43 people benefited from the course. Thereafter, we signed a 5-year social contract and were split into 4 groups. We normally participate in the project 5 days a month."

As part of the tasks on land, we must build coral nursery structures made of metal and rope to which we attach harvested coral fragments. For that matter, I have learned to wield, grind, pierce and saw metal, and work with other materials like ropes. We received all requisite protection equipment such as goggles, gloves, boots, etc. Once the structures are completed, we head out on the boat to place them in strategic areas on the seabed. We were also given wetsuits and snorkeling gear."

Recently, we went to snorkel at the same spot to check the coral nurseries, which were set up under a previous GEF UNDP SGP project. We were stunned by the success! The corals are growing and blossoming into flower-like shapes. We have also observed fish species and octopuses on the site! I am extremely pleased and satisfied with the results!"



Once the coral fragments mature, they will be transplanted to restoration areas identified in the Blue Bay Marine Park, whereby regular monitoring and maintenance will be conducted to ensure the ongoing rehabilitation of corals.

"At home and in my community, I have shared key information about coral plantation and marine biodiversity. I also participated in an awareness campaign on marine conservation whereby I got to interact with the public and impart knowledge. My children are today hooked on marine documentaries, and I sometimes relate what they are watching to the work that I do. They are very keen to learn, and they are definitely inspired!"

During the MV Wakashio oil spill, we have witnessed immeasurable devastation inflicted on our marine ecosystem. While nature feeds us and offers us a livelihood; we are compelled, in return, to take care of it."



Findings

This newsletter highlights emerging evidence of the opportunities and barriers faced by women in the blue economy sector of Mauritius and Seychelles, respectively. The unique stories of the informants are testimony to their courage and perseverance in confronting life challenges. Women who earn a living from the ocean are building resilience and adaptation mechanisms to cope and overcome gender barriers - some which are directly linked to their marine activities and others more general. Ms. Dainise Quatre has faced gender bias and stereotyping as a young mother working in marine conservation, while Ms. Andrese Flore revealed her distinct challenges as a single mother. Not exclusive to this edition of Gendered Voices, a recurring impediment faced by many fisher women (as also revealed in the Gendered Voices Environmental Edition¹²), is their lack of access to fisher persons cards which would provide a source of financial aid in times of bad weather conditions, fishing season closures, and other unforeseen circumstances. The informants have commended the diverse and inclusive UNDP Mauritius and Seychelles programmes geared at reinforcing coastal resilience, conserving marine ecosystems, and providing employment to coastal communities, including cohorts of women.



Targeted responses at policy level can address the obstacles faced by women in ocean-related activities to empower them for immediate and long-term benefits. Salient areas identified for policy intervention encompass: (i) acquiring sex-aggregated data at cross-cutting levels of the blue economy sector; (ii) launching research to identify gender gaps at all levels of the blue economy sector; (iii) taking actions against gender discrimination, bias and glass ceiling issues in the sector; (iv) devising more training and capacity building programmes for women in coastal regions across the islands; (v) investigating and creating incentives to encourage and/or facilitate fisher women's application, registration and access to fisher persons cards; (vi) consolidating women's access to loans and financial aid to afford fisheries equipment and other resources; (vii) easing the launching of women fishers' cooperative and their access to a barachois; (viii) creating networking platforms for women in ocean-related jobs to share knowledge and best practices; and (ix) gender mainstreaming in both public and private blue economy projects and activities to promote women inclusion in the sector.



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Volume 3 - Issue 06
03/2023