

5th United Nations Ocean Forum

Women navigating the Blue Economy - A conversation on challenges and opportunities in the context of value addition

Co-organized by the Permanent Mission of Chile to the WTO and UNCTAD's Trade, Gender and Development Programme

5 March 2025, 5:15 – 6:00 p.m. (CET)

Speaking notes

Welcome to the last side event of the day, and the last event of the Ocean Forum, co-organized by the Permanent Mission of Chile to the WTO and UNCTAD's Trade, Gender and Development Programme, to which I am deeply thankful for bringing us together today.

Over the past three days, we have engaged in rich discussions on the ocean economy, trade policy, and the climate-development nexus. We have explored the critical role of the ocean—not just as a source of biodiversity, but as a vital economic driver that supports food security, sustains millions of jobs, and fuels global trade.

Yet, we have also confronted some stark realities. Climate change is warming our oceans at record levels, while overfishing and harmful subsidies continue to deplete fish stocks, threatening the livelihoods of the communities who depend on fisheries.

However, despite these challenges, one thing is clear: the blue economy presents an “ocean of opportunities”, particularly for developing countries. Ocean trade hit a record \$2.2 trillion in exports in 2023, and new industries—such as marine-based plastics alternatives and sustainable aquaculture—offer promising avenues for growth.

As the Ocean Forum draws to a close, we shift our focus to an essential aspect of this discussion: the role of women in the blue economy.

Women have always played a critical role in the ocean economy, yet their contributions remain undervalued and underrecognized. For instance, women are key economic actors in fisheries and seaweed cultivation value chains, playing essential roles in harvesting, processing, and trade. Yet, as in other sectors of the economy, women remain underrepresented in decision-making, and are confined to low-paying, informal, and small-scale roles.

According to 2022 FAO data, in 2020, around 12 million women were engaged in fisheries and aquaculture on a full or part-time basis, representing 21% of the workforce. However, in the processing sector—where much of the value in the seafood industry is generated—women account for over 50% of full-time jobs and 71% of part-time roles.

The blue economy presents new opportunities for women to advance into leadership, value-added activities, and higher-income roles. For instance, seaweed cultivation is expanding across food production, cosmetics, pharmaceuticals, and biodegradable plastics, with women in small island developing states and coastal communities playing a crucial role. However, limited access to technical training, finance, and markets prevents them from scaling up these activities. Similarly, in fisheries,

women are often confined to low-value tasks, while higher-income roles in processing and exports remain out of reach. Addressing these barriers requires business development support, financial resources, and training.

As in other sectors, one of the biggest challenges is the lack of reliable, disaggregated data on women's participation in the blue economy. Without it, policymakers cannot effectively address gender disparities. To close this gap, international organizations, governments, and research institutions must collaborate to make women's contributions more visible, valued, and integrated into decision-making.

This discussion today will greatly benefit from the expertise and practical experience of a diverse group of panelists, from key international organizations and industry experts working directly in fisheries and seaweed sectors.

By bringing together policy expertise and real-world experience, we can identify tangible, actionable strategies to ensure women's full and fair participation in the blue economy.

To conclude, it is important to stress that the blue economy is not just an economic opportunity—it is a critical driver of sustainability, equity, and resilience. But for it to be truly inclusive and transformative, we must ensure that women are not only participants but also beneficiaries and decision-makers in its future.

I wish our esteemed panelists a productive discussion.