SOCIOECONOMICS · GENDER & INCLUSION

Gender Roles in the Lake Victoria Blue Economy

Gender-disaggregated participation, governance, income and barriers across six blue-economy sectors in five Kenyan Lake Victoria counties, and what it takes to make inclusion real.

REFERENCE	ISSUED	REGION
C82_3(1)	**June 2026**	**Five Kenyan lake counties**

SOCIOECONOMICS

0.73
gender parity ratio in cage aquaculture, the most inclusive sector

89%
of respondents report income gaps between genders

75 pp
gap between women's participation and felt representation

200k to 98k t
fall in capture production, 2012 to 2023

Background

Lake Victoria's blue economy supports over 4 million livelihoods across Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania. The Kenyan side hosts about 47,000 fishers and 15,000 boats alongside a fast-growing cage sector, yet capture production fell from 200,000 t in 2012 to roughly 98,000 t in 2023 under overfishing, pollution, climate variability and water-hyacinth invasion. These pressures interact powerfully with the lake's gender architecture, in which men dominate harvesting, women concentrate in post-harvest trade and processing, and youth and persons with disabilities (PWDs) face compounding access barriers.

National and regional frameworks, including Kenya Vision 2030, the National Blue Economy Strategy, the State Department for the Blue Economy and Fisheries Strategic Plan (2023 to 2027), the LVFO Fisheries Management Plan IV, the African Union Blue Economy Strategy (2019) and the African Disability Protocol (in force 3 May 2024), all commit to mainstreaming gender, youth and disability inclusion. Implementation, however, has lagged behind ambition, and robust gender-disaggregated evidence at landing-site level is needed to translate policy into measurable change.

Methods

A cross-sectional structured survey was administered between 2025 and 2026 across 18 landing sites and institutional offices in Migori, Homa Bay, Kisumu, Siaya and Busia. Likert items and open-ended probes captured participation across six sectors, governance representation by group, income, barriers and environmental change. Data were collected via KoboToolbox and analysed using descriptive statistics, gender parity ratios and content-coded synthesis of the open-ended responses.

Key Findings

Cage aquaculture is the standout for inclusion

Cage aquaculture recorded the highest gender parity ratio (0.73) of any primary sector and is emerging as a structural exit for women fishmongers historically exposed to the *jaboya* (sex-for-fish) economy, with

documented programmes supporting women-owned cages and cooperatives. Water transport was the least inclusive at 0.37. Income gaps were near-universal (89%), with median blue-economy income at KES 20,000 per month (mean KES 41,667; range KES 2,000 to 400,000). Qualitative responses describe how fish processing yields lower turnover than fishing, locking women into the lowest-margin nodes.

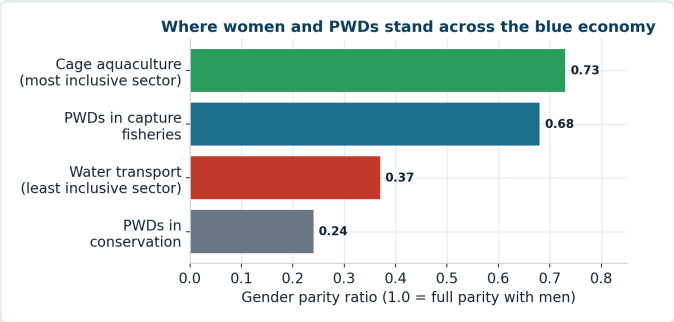


Figure 1. Gender parity ratios: cage aquaculture leads at 0.73, while PWDs reach only a quarter of men's level in conservation.

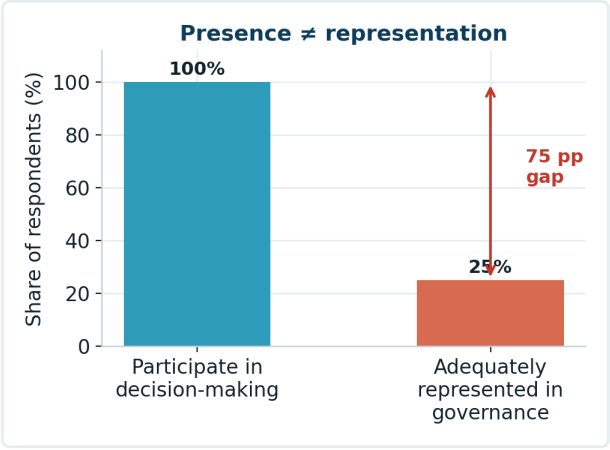


Figure 2. All respondents affirm women participate in decision-making, yet only a quarter feel women are adequately represented, a 75-point gap.

Barriers and environmental strain compound vulnerability

The most-cited barriers were cultural and traditional norms, limited capital and finance, male dominance and elite capture of BMU leadership, and caregiving burdens. Meanwhile 82% of respondents perceive the lake as having deteriorated over the past five years, with overfishing (86%), rising water levels (68%) and pollution (67%) the top stressors, followed by water hyacinth (28%). This damage falls heavily on women's shoreline processing assets and on group- and female-owned cage operations.

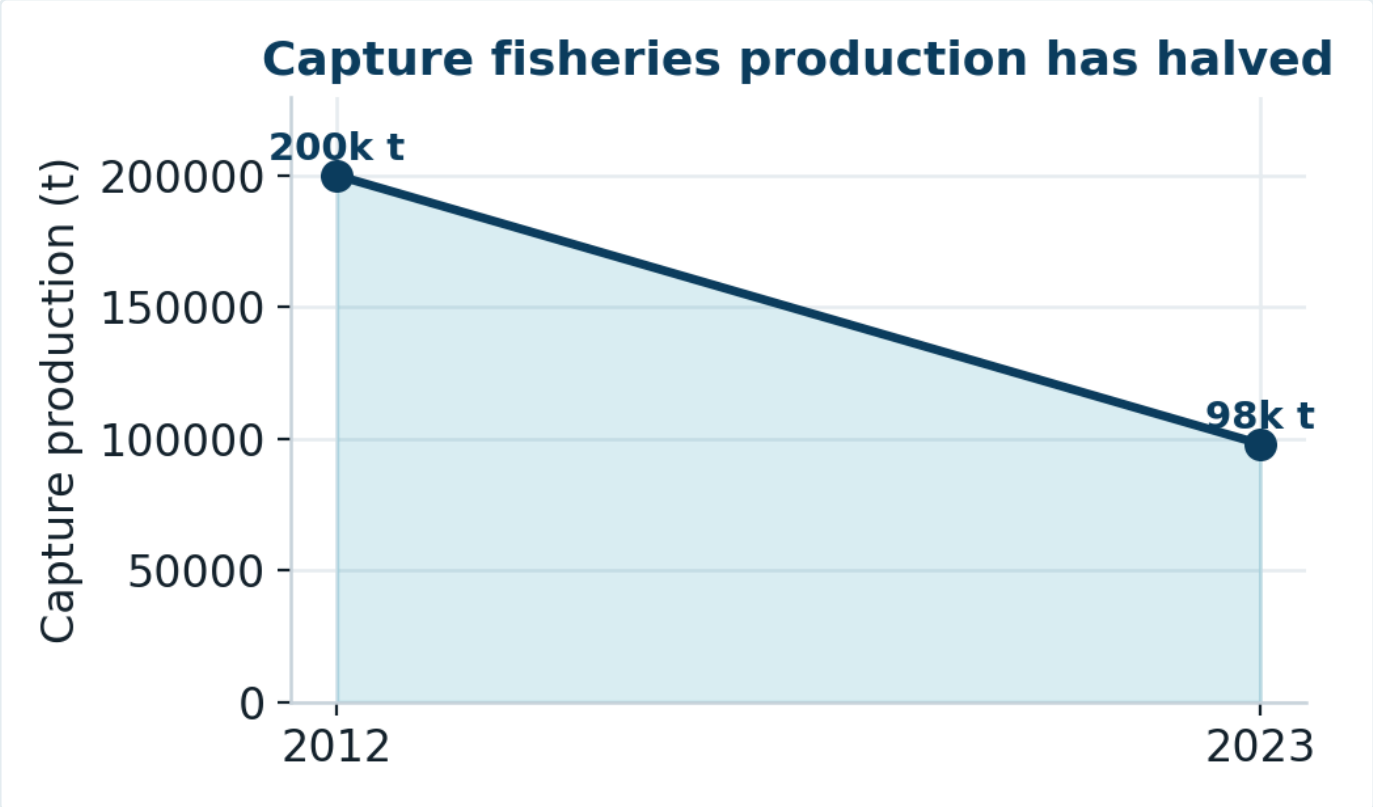


Figure 3. Capture-fisheries production roughly halved between 2012 and 2023, intensifying competition and pressure on the lowest-margin nodes where women concentrate.

Most-cited barrier	Mentions	Key dimensions
Cultural and traditional norms	18	Menstrual taboos; lake as a male preserve
Limited capital and finance	14	Start-up capital, collateral, no insurance
Male dominance and elite capture	11	BMU leadership; tokenistic inclusion
Domestic and caregiving burden	7	Time poverty limiting trade and night fishing

Conclusions

- Cage aquaculture is a genuinely gender-inclusive primary sector and the most significant structural shift in a generation, driven partly by women's deliberate pivot away from the *jaboya* economy.
- Female youth and PWDs are the most excluded groups and remain nearly invisible to the very policies that name them.
- Women perform substantial post-harvest work, yet that segment receives the least investment; presence in decision-making does not equal representation in governance.

Recommendations

1. Reform BMU and co-management governance: move beyond the two-thirds rule to reserved office-bearer seats for women, female youth and PWDs, paired with leadership training and stipends.
2. Establish a Blue Economy Inclusion Fund with concessional credit for women-led cooperatives and collateral substitutes such as group savings and harvest contracts.
3. Invest in women-targeted post-harvest infrastructure, including solar drying racks, cold-chain hubs and dignified sanitation at major landing sites.
4. Develop a subsidised cage-aquaculture insurance product covering disease, fish-kill and pollution-driven mortality.
5. Address harmful norms through community dialogue, strengthen lake security for women traders, and run longitudinal gender-disaggregated panel surveys.

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