

Statement: “Accelerating Ocean Sustainability through Gender Equality”

Ocean sustainability is inseparable from social justice—and social justice is not possible without gender equality. UN Etxea, following its participation in the side event at the United Nations Ocean Conference—organized in collaboration with UNESCO, the Basque Government and ICM/CSIC, issues an urgent call to the international community to fully recognize and integrate a gender perspective into ocean governance, marine science, and the blue economy.

Ocean degradation disproportionately affects women and girls, especially in coastal communities, developing countries, and Small Island Developing States (SIDS). Marine pollution, climate change, the depletion of fish stocks, and an increase in natural disasters impact not only biodiversity but also livelihoods traditionally supported by women—such as artisanal fishing, seafood sales, and community-based tourism—exacerbating existing structural inequalities. Women make up 50% of the global workforce in fisheries and aquaculture and up to 62% in post-harvest processing, yet their labor remains invisible, undervalued, or informal.

Marine science—a cornerstone of solutions for a sustainable ocean—also reflects a troubling gap.

Although women constitute 38% of the research workforce in ocean science, this figure has remained stagnant since 2015. The barriers they face include harassment, discrimination, unequal caregiving burdens, lack of funding and mentorship, inadequate equipment, and underrepresentation in leadership roles. We need a structural transformation in scientific institutions to ensure safe, inclusive environments that acknowledge the differentiated contributions of women scientists—including Indigenous women, youth, and those from the Global South.

Furthermore, women activists and defenders of marine environments face threats, disinformation campaigns, and violence—both online and offline—simply for raising their voices in defense of the ocean. This violence silences critical contributions that are essential for advancing equitable and comprehensive solutions. We denounce the impunity with which women in science, activism, and environmental journalism are targeted.

The blue economy, while promising sustainability and growth, brings both opportunities and risks. If not designed from a gender perspective, it can reinforce or even deepen pre-existing inequalities. Already, many women are relegated to informal, precarious jobs without access to financial resources or entrepreneurship opportunities. It is urgent to integrate support mechanisms, access to credit, social protection, and the strengthening of women's networks within the blue sector.

At UN Etxea, we call for:

1. **Recognizing women as agents of change** in all ocean-related sectors: fishers, scientists, dockworkers, entrepreneurs, artisans, tour guides, and community leaders.
2. **Collecting sex- and gender-disaggregated data** across all ocean-related areas: education, employment, environmental impact, technology access, health, governance, and climate-induced displacement.
3. **Promoting the equitable participation of women in ocean decision-making**, from local institutions to international forums, ensuring their leadership and representation in scientific bodies, fisheries management committees, and international negotiations.
4. **Implementing zero-tolerance policies against harassment and gender-based violence**, both on land and at sea, with effective mechanisms for prevention, reporting, and sanction.
5. **Supporting the traditional knowledge of Indigenous and coastal women**, which is key to sustainable and adaptive marine ecosystem management.
6. **Fostering inclusive ocean education from an early age**, embedding gender equality as a cross-cutting principle in curricula, materials, and teacher training.

We are in a critical decade for ocean action. The UN Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development (2021–2030) and the BBNJ Agreement offer key opportunities to reorient ocean governance toward a just, inclusive, and resilient paradigm. We call on Member States, multilateral agencies, scientific institutions, and the private sector to commit—concretely and measurably—to a transformative gender agenda.

The ocean we need for the future we want must be governed with equality—where the voices of women and girls are not only present, but leading in conservation, research, innovation, and development.

Because a healthy ocean is only possible in an equal society.