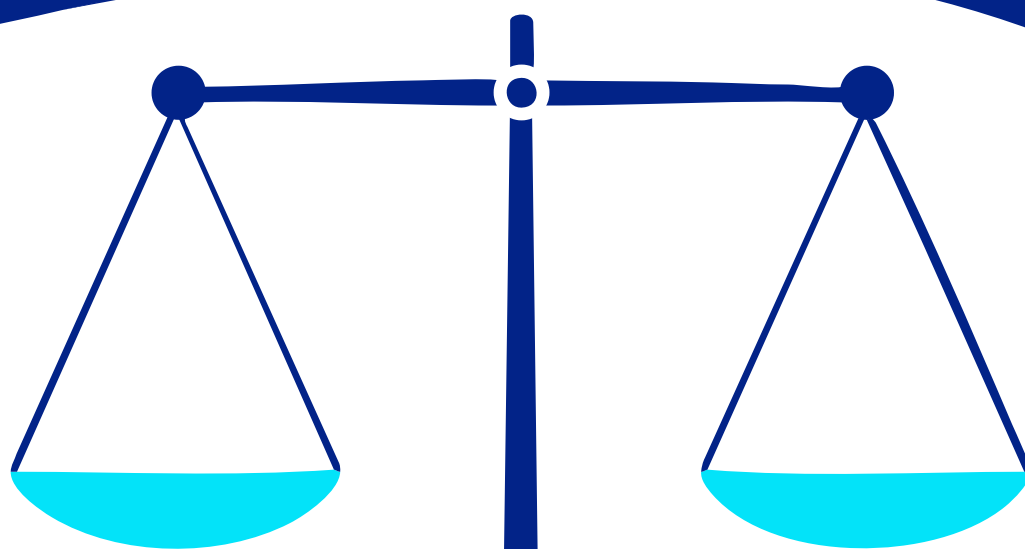


GENDER DIMENSIONS

IN

EU MARINE RESEARCH
PROJECTS

REFLECTIONS FROM THE BLUE4ALL PROJECT



INTRODUCTION: GENDER DIMENSIONS IN MARINE CONSERVATION RESEARCH



Gender equality is a core value of the European Union. Through its [Gender Equality Strategy 2026–2030](#), the European Commission has committed to strengthening gender equality across all areas of society, including research and innovation. In Horizon Europe, these commitments are reflected in requirements to integrate gender dimensions into research and innovation content, as well as the requirement for public bodies, research organisations, and higher education institutions seeking funding to have a [Gender Equality Plan](#) in place.

[Blue4all](#) is a Horizon Europe project that addresses key challenges in marine conservation across Europe through collaborative research and stakeholder engagement in marine protected areas (MPAs). While gender dimensions of MPA governance were recognised as relevant during project development, they were not integrated into the project's research activities.

To explore this gap, a group of project partners conducted a mid-term reflection exercise, combining an internal survey with a workshop held during the project's annual meeting in January 2025. The exercise examined perceptions of gender within Blue4all and identified opportunities to strengthen gender-responsive approaches within Blue4all and EU marine research projects more generally. Building on these discussions, the team subsequently incorporated gender perspectives into research activities at the Isola delle Femmine MPA in Sicily, Italy.

This brief shares lessons learned from these experiences. It presents findings from the internal reflection process, offering recommendations for integrating gender considerations into EU-funded research projects, and highlights insights from research which applied a gender equity lens in an MPA context.

GENDER DIMENSIONS IN PROJECT MANAGEMENT AND DESIGN



SURVEY

In December 2024, Blue4all conducted an **anonymous online survey** to explore project partners' perspectives on gender dimensions and integration of gender into EU marine research projects. The survey, which drew from the [GenderWave](#) tool, **received 41 responses** and provided an overview of consortium views on **incorporating gender considerations into project management and design**.

How important is gender equity for you in your work?

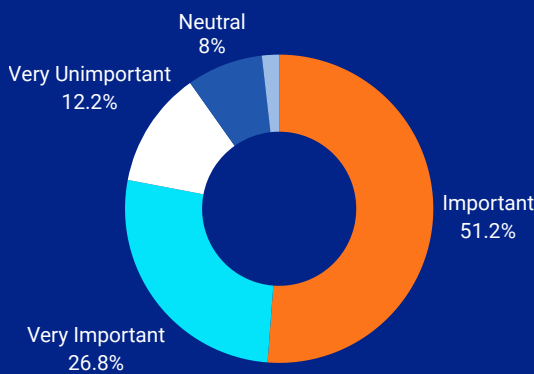


Figure 1. Consortium survey responses on the importance of gender equity in their work

Are you interested in incorporating gender equity issues in upcoming Blue4all work?

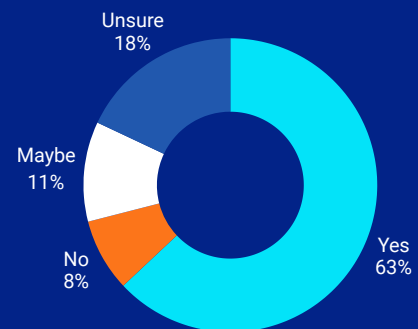


Figure 2. Consortium survey responses on the interest of incorporating gender equity issues in upcoming Blue4all work

Survey Outcomes

- Participants weighed multiple pre-identified **opportunities to strengthen gender equality** within EU marine research projects. Adopting practices such as the use of inclusive language in project communication, were considered readily achievable but setting similar employment terms were viewed as more challenging to address.
- When asked to prioritise elements of a hypothetical project gender equality plan, respondents most frequently identified **equal employment conditions** and **balanced gender representation in leadership roles**.
- Respondents highlighted the importance of planning research that incorporates **gender equality from the outset of a project**, and of providing **clear guidance and resources** to support partners with differing levels of expertise and experience in gender research.





WORKSHOP

In January 2025, Blue4all partners participated in a workshop during the project's General Assembly in Tallinn, Estonia. Building on the findings of the consortium-wide survey, participants **reflected on opportunities to strengthen gender equity and equality in future MPA-related projects**, governance processes, and stakeholder engagement. Discussions also examined broader **factors shaping gender inequalities in marine conservation**, including access to resources and data, power relations, livelihoods, and political dynamics, and explored how projects can avoid reinforcing existing inequities and instead support more inclusive outcomes.



Workshop Outcomes

- Participants emphasised that responsibility for advancing **gender equality** should be **embedded within project coordination structures** to ensure accountability, continuity, and institutional support.
- A dedicated **gender focal point** or representative was seen as important for coordinating actions, overseeing implementation, and ensuring that gender-related commitments remain relevant and are regularly reviewed throughout the project lifecycle.
- Discussions highlighted the importance of avoiding situations in which **responsibility for gender equality falls disproportionately on women** or a small number of individuals.
- Participants identified practical opportunities to **make project activities more inclusive**, including considering accessibility requirements and caregiving responsibilities when planning meetings and events.



RECOMMENDATIONS

Project Management and Design



INTEGRATE GENDER CONSIDERATIONS FROM THE OUTSET

Embed gender considerations into project design and management, research questions and methods, and stakeholder engagement from the earliest stages of project development.



PRIORITISE BALANCED LEADERSHIP AND REPRESENTATION

Promote balanced gender representation in leadership and decision-making roles. Ensure participation is meaningful and avoid tokenistic approaches to diversity.



ASSIGN A GENDER OR DIVERSITY FOCAL POINT

Assign responsibility for coordinating gender-related actions within project management structures. Dedicated focal points can help ensure commitments are implemented and regularly reviewed, while avoiding overburdening a small number of individuals.



PROVIDE CLEAR AND CONTEXT-SENSITIVE GUIDANCE

Develop practical guidance that reflects the realities of multi-country and multi-institutional collaborations and supports partners with different levels of experience in incorporating gender equality considerations in EU marine research projects.



USE INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE

Use inclusive and gender-sensitive language in internal and external project communications, publications, and outreach materials.



CONSIDER THE IMPLICATIONS OF CONSORTIUM MEMBERS' GENDER WHEN IN THE FIELD

Researchers may face different safety risks, or be perceived differently in the field based on gender. Project management should account for this through planning, support, and safeguarding.

GENDER DIMENSIONS IN RESEARCH CONTENT

Blue4All Case Study in an Italian MPA

Encouraged by the survey results and workshop discussions, our team designed a small pilot study to **incorporate gender perspectives in the research content of Blue4all**. Conducted in collaboration with the Capo Gallo–Isola delle Femmine MPA in Sicily, the study explored **how gender shapes experiences, opportunities, participation, and decision-making within the MPA**.

The study built on the gender equity self-assessment framework for MPA management developed by [Bonilla Anariba et al. \(2025\)](#). Grounded in Feminist Political Ecology, the framework examines five indicators of gender equity: gender roles and power relations, gendered uses and values, gendered knowledge and priorities, gender-responsive management, and gender-inclusive management. These dimensions were adapted to the local context and translated into a practical research approach. The study focused on stakeholders connected to the MPA, targeting MPA representatives (Blue4all’s local contact point at the University of Palermo), as well as tourists and tourism operators such as boat operators and dive instructors. The following steps outline how the research was conducted.



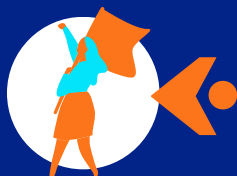
STEP 1 - MPA SELF-ASSESSMENT (SURVEY)

A survey completed by Blue4All’s local contact points explored perceptions of gender equity in MPA management and how gender shapes participation in management processes.



STEP 2 - TOURISM EXPERIENCES (SURVEY)

A second survey examined perceptions of gendered participation in tourism activities, focusing on access, experiences, and gender-specific needs. The survey was distributed to tourists and tourism operators via online channels and in print at multiple locations across Isola delle Femmine.



STEP 3 - FURTHER INSIGHTS (INTERVIEWS)

Semi-structured interviews with tourism operators explored gendered access to livelihoods and perceptions of gender differences.



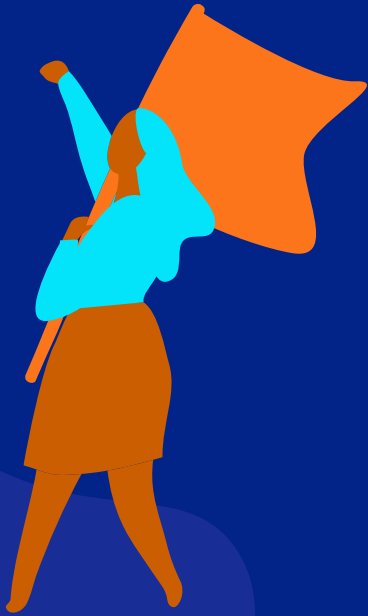
STEP 4 - AUTO-ETHNOGRAPHIC OBSERVATIONS

Auto-ethnographic observations explored gendered experiences from the perspective of both researcher and tourist, providing additional context for interpreting the findings.



STEP 5 - FINDINGS DISCUSSED WITH MPA REPRESENTATIVES

Results were presented to the Blue4all Capo Gallo - Isola delle femmine MPA representatives for feedback and discussion.



'we have to fight to be where we are'

-Female tourism operator-

Referring to the array of barriers women face to owning a tourism business in Isola delle Femmine

'The nautical world is often dominated by men rather than women or non-binary people'

-Tourist response-



'I can do it (carry heavy equipment) by myself. Because I know that there is no difference. If I am the instructor, it's because I can do it'

-Female diving instructor-



RESEARCH FINDINGS

Gender Equity in Capo Gallo - Isola delle Femmine

GENDER ROLES SHAPE EXPERIENCES OF THE MPA

Informal gender roles influence access to tourism-related livelihoods, the distribution of tasks, and tourist behaviour, shaping how different people experience and engage with the MPA.



SAFETY CONCERNS AND GENDER-SPECIFIC NEEDS REMAIN UNMET

Female tourists and tourism operators reported experiences of objectification and safety concerns. Several gender-specific needs also remain unmet, including access to changing facilities, secure sanitation, and equipment designed for women.



AWARENESS OF GENDERED DIFFERENCES IS ITSELF GENDERED

Male respondents have demonstrated gender-blindness, often failing to recognise or acknowledge gendered differences reported by women. As a result, lived experiences and inequalities may remain invisible.



GENDER IS NOT INTEGRATED INTO MPA MANAGEMENT

Although inequitable participation can undermine effective MPA management, gender was largely absent from both formal and informal management processes and was often considered secondary to explicit conservation objectives.



MPAs CAN REINFORCE OR CHALLENGE GENDER NORMS

MPA governance and management can either reinforce existing gender inequalities or help address them. Meaningful opportunities for women to participate as stakeholders in decision-making can lead to more equitable outcomes.



LESSONS LEARNED

Gender Equity in Research Design and Implementation

GENDER IS A SENSITIVE TOPIC

Especially in contexts characterised by strong traditional gender norms, participants may be reluctant to engage in discussions about gender. Careful facilitation and respect for participants' boundaries are essential.

1

REACHING DIVERSE PERSPECTIVES REQUIRES TARGETED APPROACHES

When researchers approached groups, male participants often spoke on behalf of others, making non-male participants difficult to reach. Targeted strategies may be needed to include diverse perspectives.

2

SOCIAL AND CULTURAL CONTEXT SHAPES PERCEPTIONS OF GENDER

Local norms, values, and social structures influence how gender is understood, experienced, and discussed. Gender equity research therefore needs to be sensitive to local contexts.

3

RESEARCHER POSITIONALITY INFLUENCES THE RESEARCH PROCESS

Researchers should reflect on how their own identities, experiences, and assumptions shape data collection, interactions with participants, and the interpretation of findings.

4

LANGUAGE AND CULTURAL SUPPORT STRENGTHEN IMPLEMENTATION

Appropriate language and cultural support can improve research implementation.

5



CONCLUSION

Gender shapes experiences, opportunities, and participation in marine research and conservation. Blue4all's experience shows that gender is an issue many people care about, yet the expertise and resources to design and carry out gender research, and to integrate gender into project management and research content, is not always available.

The consortium survey and workshop highlighted the importance the Blue4all consortium places on gender-inclusive project planning, accountability, and practical guidance for appropriate gender research design and implementation. The gender equity pilot study at the Capo Gallo - Isola delle Femmine MPA further revealed how gender shapes experiences, opportunities, participation, and stakeholder engagement in ways that often go unnoticed.

Taken together, these experiences show that gender dimensions should not be treated as a stand-alone requirement or an afterthought, but embedded throughout project design, management, research activities, and stakeholder engagement. Blue4all's experience demonstrates that gender considerations can be successfully integrated into an ongoing project, even if earlier integration would likely have increased their impact. For EU-funded marine research and conservation projects, adopting a gender perspective helps strengthen inclusion, improve the relevance of research, and support more equitable and effective outcomes.



CALL TO ACTION



Do not leave gender as a box to tick at reporting time. Whether you are writing your next proposal or running a project today, make gender dimensions visible, appoint a gender-responsible person or bring a gender expert onto the team, and approach the topic strategically by embedding it in both project management and research content.



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