

Blue economy: why women must ride the wave of Africa's maritime sector

Women have an unrivalled opportunity to drive the industrialisation of Africa's oceans, according to Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma, the African Union chairwoman

Jane Dudman

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The African continent has a two-pronged weapon in its race to industrialise and make use of its natural resources, according to Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma, chairwoman of the 54-member African Union (AU): women and oceans.

In March, while the former South African home affairs minister was attending a conference in Ethiopia on getting more women into parliament, the AU was hosting the first event specifically for women in Africa's maritime sector in the Angolan capital, Luanda. The agenda covered how women can best make inroads into areas including shipping and maritime transport, fishing, offshore mining and other aspects of the "blue economy".

For Dlamini-Zuma, the two themes are intertwined. She believes that developing African sea power presents an unrivalled opportunity for women. Not only, she says, is the blue economy a vital part of Africa's 50-year industrialisation plan, Agenda 2063, but it also provides a great chance to achieve the continent's post-2015 development goals on women's involvement in employment and leadership.

"The majority of our countries are coastal, or islands, so the oceanic space is bigger than our land mass," says Dlamini-Zuma, adding that women have a key role to play in addressing the longstanding neglect of Africa's oceans.

"Now we're trying to get everybody to focus on this and we are also saying to women that this is an underdeveloped area. Don't let the men develop it. Don't come in at the end. You must be part of that development."

The Luanda conference, originally scheduled for last year but postponed because of the Ebola outbreak, included female maritime professionals from public and private sectors, and highlighted the growing number of young female entrepreneurs in the blue economy.

"Women have come together and ... those who work in the industry ... want to see how they can be entrepreneurs in the industry," says Dlamini-Zuma.

One of those entrepreneurs is Ipeleng Selele, founder and chief executive of the South African Khumo Group. The main Khumo business is marketing and branding, but Selele is a keen entrepreneur in the shipping industry who is now investing in her first vessel.

Selele says it's encouraging to see other young African women taking an active economic role in the maritime sector, from shipping, maintenance and port services to financing. "I want to become an African maritime champion," she says.

Selele is working with the AU, maritime authorities, operators and ports to identify opportunities to develop a sustainable, integrated maritime sector, which will create jobs - both directly and indirectly - in areas such as logistics and transport. It's still early days for African female shipowners, but Selele is excited by the possibilities.

Dlamini-Zuma says the only way to achieve economic growth is by building an infrastructure across the continent that links its capitals and centres.

China is taking a leading role in this process. In January, the country signed a memorandum of understanding with the AU to invest in a high-speed rail project to link all 54 members of the union.

Dlamini-Zuma won't reveal how much China is investing, but says it will be important to also encourage homegrown investment. "We want to find a way where any African who wants to put something into that project will be able to do so," she says. "We want to do it in a more creative way. We don't know if that will work, but we are looking at it."

Dlamini-Zuma outlined her plans for the African blue economy as part of her speech at last week's Women in Parliaments conference at the AU headquarters in Addis Ababa, at which more than 400 mostly female parliamentarians gathered to discuss how to get more women into political power. Over the past 20 years, the number of female parliamentarians has risen, although worldwide only one in five is female.

The AU chairwoman says issues that are critical to women must be at the centre of the post-2015 development agenda, including giving women access to education, training, technology and finance. "We know this will happen faster and be more sustainable through the empowerment of women and girls," she says. "That is why it is so important to ensure that in all our countries we reach this critical mass of women in parliaments and governments."

She has little patience for those who dislike the use of quotas or affirmative action, both of which have been used in South Africa. The country, where 42% of parliamentarians are female, is ninth in the list of the top 10 countries with the highest number of female parliamentarians.

"I'm very happy to say that the ruling party [in South Africa] introduced quotas and whether I would have made it or not without quota, I'm here," she says. "Quotas have brought many more women and that's very important. If you're alone or there are just a few of you, you can't bring about change. You need a critical number of women and we have to ensure we do everything we can to get more women."

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