



Commission for Gender Equality



Stakeholder Engagement

Women's Economic Empowerment in the Ports Sector



Commission for Gender Equality

REPORT STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT



Women's Economic Empowerment in the Ports Sector Engagement

Date: 6 December 2024

Venue: Royal Palm Hotel, Umhlanga, KwaZulu-Natal

Partners: Commission for Gender Equality (CGE), Ports Regulator of South Africa (PRSA), and Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment (B-BBEE) Commission



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1. Introduction

The Commission for Gender Equality (CGE) is a constitutional body established in terms of Chapter 9 of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996). Its mandate is set out in Section 187(1), which requires the Commission to promote respect for gender equality and to protect, develop, and advance its attainment across all sectors of society. Within South Africa's constitutional democracy, the CGE therefore plays a critical oversight role in ensuring that both public and private institutions uphold the principles of equality, dignity, and non-discrimination.

Section 187(2) of the Constitution further authorises the Commission to monitor, investigate, research, educate, lobby, advise, and report on matters concerning gender equality. These responsibilities are operationalised through the Commission for Gender Equality Act 39 of 1996, which provides the legislative framework guiding the Commission's work. Under this mandate, the CGE evaluates government and private-sector policies, conducts public education initiatives, reviews legislation from a gender perspective, and investigates complaints of gender discrimination. The Commission also monitors South Africa's compliance with international gender equality commitments, including obligations arising from instruments such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).

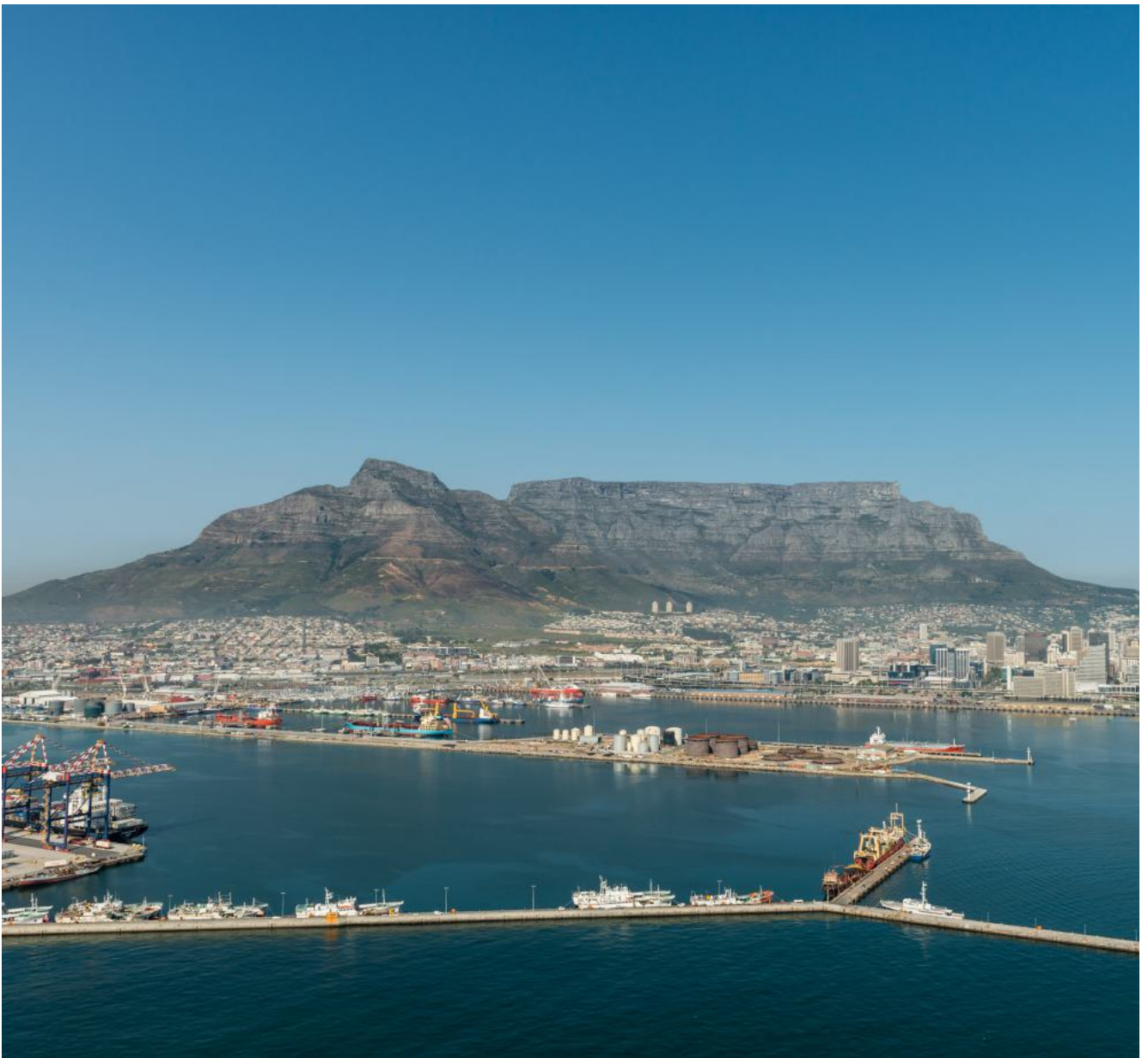
Despite the existence of progressive legal frameworks supporting gender equality, significant structural inequalities remain visible within many sectors of the South African economy. Historically male-dominated industries continue to reproduce patterns of exclusion that limit women's participation in leadership, technical professions, and economic ownership. The maritime and ports sector reflects these broader structural inequalities. Although it plays a central role in South Africa's economic development and global trade, women remain significantly underrepresented in both operational and decision-making roles within this industry.

It is within this context that the Commission for Gender Equality (CGE) convened a strategic stakeholder engagement in partnership with the Ports Regulator of South Africa (PRSA) and the Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment (B-BBEE) Commission. The engagement, held on 6 December 2024 at the Royal Palm Hotel in Umhlanga, sought to facilitate dialogue on women's economic access, participation, and inclusion within the maritime and ports sector.

The engagement provided a platform for key stakeholders to examine existing barriers that limit women's access to economic opportunities in the sector. These barriers include structural inequalities in skills development, procurement access, industry culture, and regulatory oversight. By bringing together regulators, industry actors, and civil society organisations, the dialogue aimed to identify practical strategies to strengthen accountability, improve gender inclusion, and advance structural change within the maritime economy.



Through this engagement, the Commission for Gender Equality sought to ensure that discussions around economic access and participation in the maritime sector remain grounded in gender justice. The engagement, therefore, centred on the experiences of women working within the sector, while also interrogating the policy and institutional frameworks that shape their participation. This report documents the discussions that emerged during the engagement and reflects on the key observations, institutional insights, and recommendations that arose from the dialogue.



Cape Town Harbour



2. Background: The Maritime and Ports Sector in South Africa

Understanding the significance of the maritime sector is essential in situating the purpose of this engagement and the broader conversations around women's economic empowerment within the ports sector. The maritime industry forms part of what is often described as the ocean economy or the blue economy. While these terms are sometimes used interchangeably, they broadly refer to economic systems that depend on ocean and marine resources. The ocean economy has been described as "that portion of the economy that relies on the ocean as an input to the production process or which by geographic location, takes place on or under the ocean" (Struwig et al., 2024:2). In this sense, it represents "the sum of the economic activities of ocean-based industries, and the assets, goods, and services of maritime ecosystems" (Struwig et al., 2024:2). It includes economic activities that occur directly in ocean spaces as well as those that depend on marine resources and outputs, forming a network of interconnected industries that collectively inform coastal and maritime economies (Struwig et al., 2024:2).

The blue economy has increasingly gained global attention as a development framework capable of supporting economic growth while ensuring environmental sustainability. According to the World Bank, the blue economy is understood as "a sustainable economic business model with significant opportunities in the maritime sectors in the sea and shipping activities" (Zulu et al., 2023:1). It is further recognised as a development model that contributes to environmental protection, economic expansion, and social development simultaneously (Zulu et al., 2023:2). Within this context, the blue economy includes "all market economic activities, sectors, and industries supported by marine and coastal areas, their assets, goods, and services" as well as critical livelihood activities such as fishing, marine harvesting, and coastal economic participation (Dube and Tekwa, 2025:194). The maritime economy, therefore, represents a cluster of interlinked sectors, ranging from traditional activities such as shipping and fisheries to emerging industries such as marine biotechnology and renewable ocean energy (Struwig et al., 2024:2; Struwig et al., 2024:4).



In the African context, the maritime economy plays a particularly significant role in shaping trade, development, and regional integration. Africa is often described as a maritime continent, with almost ninety 90% percent of its trade transported by sea (Zulu et al., 2023:2). The continent consists of a coastline spanning approximately 47 000 kilometres and includes thirty-eight (38) coastal and island states (Zulu et al., 2023:2; Mkhonto, 2022:1). These vast maritime spaces include oceans, seas, coasts, rivers, lakes, and other aquatic resources that collectively form the foundation of the African blue economy (Dube and Tekwa, 2025:194). Within this broader context, the maritime sector has been described as “the lifeblood of the continent with significant opportunities for economic development” (Zulu et al., 2023:2).

Recognising this potential, the African Union has increasingly positioned the blue economy as a key development pathway for the continent. Initiatives such as the African Integrated Maritime Strategy (2050 AIMS) seek to strengthen maritime governance, improve security, and unlock economic opportunities within Africa’s ocean spaces (Dube and Tekwa, 2025:194). At the regional level, organisations such as the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), which includes South Africa among its twenty-two (22) member states bordering the Indian Ocean, promote regional cooperation in maritime trade, economic development, and ocean governance. These regional efforts also emphasise the importance of integrating women into maritime industries, including offshore mining, fisheries, shipping, and maritime transport (Dube and Tekwa, 2025:194). These initiatives highlight the growing recognition that the ocean economy represents not only an economic opportunity but also a platform for inclusive development and equitable economic participation across the region.

South Africa occupies a strategic position within this broader maritime landscape. With an extensive coastline and well-established port infrastructure, the country has historically relied on maritime trade as a central component of its economic development. Approximately thirty (30) per cent of South Africa’s population lives within 60 kms of the coastline, highlighting the social and economic importance of coastal regions to the national economy (Struwig et al., 2024:2). The country also has a long maritime history, with an estimated thirty thousand (30,000) vessels passing through South African waters each year (Struwig et al., 2024:5).

South Africa’s maritime infrastructure is supported by a network of major seaports distributed along its coastline. These include Saldanha Bay, Cape Town, and Mossel Bay in the Western Cape, Gqeberha, Ngqura, and East London in the Eastern Cape, and the ports of Durban and Richards Bay in KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) (Struwig et al., 2024:5). South African ports are among the largest in Africa with the estimated “total contribution of coastal resources to the South African economy being approximately R57 Billion” (Struwig et. al., 2024:6). Within this economy, Durban is recognised as the busiest port on the continent, handling more than 87 million tons of cargo annually (Struwig et al., 2024:6). More broadly, it must be noted that the maritime trade accounts for approximately 3.5 percent of global trade which flows through South African waters, while roughly eighty percent of the country’s trade is transported through its maritime routes (Zulu et al., 2023:2).



Despite this strategic importance, the maritime sector in South Africa continues to face several structural challenges. Scholars have observed that the sector remains underdeveloped, fragmented, and under resourced, limiting its full economic potential (Zulu et al., 2023:2). In response to these challenges, the South African government introduced 'Operation Phakisa: Unlocking the Ocean Economy' as a national strategy to drive economic development within the maritime sector and support the broader objectives of the National Development Plan (Dube and Tekwa, 2025:194). Through this initiative, the government seeks to expand ocean-based economic activities while also addressing historical inequalities that shape access to maritime resources and economic participation.

The maritime sector also plays a significant role within the province of KwaZulu-Natal. Located on the southeastern coast of South Africa, the province borders the Indian Ocean and serves as a critical gateway for maritime trade and regional economic integration. KZN is the second most populous province in the country, with approximately 12,2 million residents, the majority of whom are black South Africans, followed by Indian, white, and coloured populations. The province also includes significant rural areas where economic opportunities remain unevenly distributed (Mofokeng and Simelane, 2024:11; Statistics South Africa, 2025).

Within the province, the maritime economy is structured across several interconnected sectors, including freight logistics, marine support services, tourism, fisheries, aquaculture, and marine energy activities (Zulu et al., 2023:3). These activities are largely concentrated around two major maritime hubs, the Port of Durban and the Port of Richards Bay, which function as key transport gateways linking regional production systems to global trade networks. These ports are supported by national road and rail infrastructure, including the N2 and N3 transport corridors, enabling the province to integrate into national and international commerce systems (Zulu et al., 2023:3). As a result, the maritime sector plays a central role in shaping economic development and employment opportunities within the province.

However, participation in the maritime economy remains uneven, particularly for historically marginalised groups. Research has shown that the blue economy has traditionally been male-dominated, with gender stereotypes often limiting women's access to opportunities within the sector (Dube and Tekwa, 2025:196). These stereotypes shape perceptions of women's capabilities and are reflected in both workplace cultures and the language used to describe women's contributions within maritime industries (Dube and Tekwa, 2025:196). As a result, women's participation in maritime sectors often remains concentrated in lower-value activities and informal roles that offer limited economic security.



These inequalities are further intensified by the intersection of race, gender, and class, which often places black South African women at the lowest levels of the maritime economic structure (Dube and Tekwa, 2025:196). For example, small-scale fisherwomen are frequently relegated to insecure, low-paid work in pre- and post-harvest processing rather than higher-value production roles (Dube and Tekwa, 2025:196). Women also face barriers to accessing marine resources, maritime education, and technical training opportunities necessary to enter higher-skilled positions within the sector (Dube and Tekwa, 2025:195).

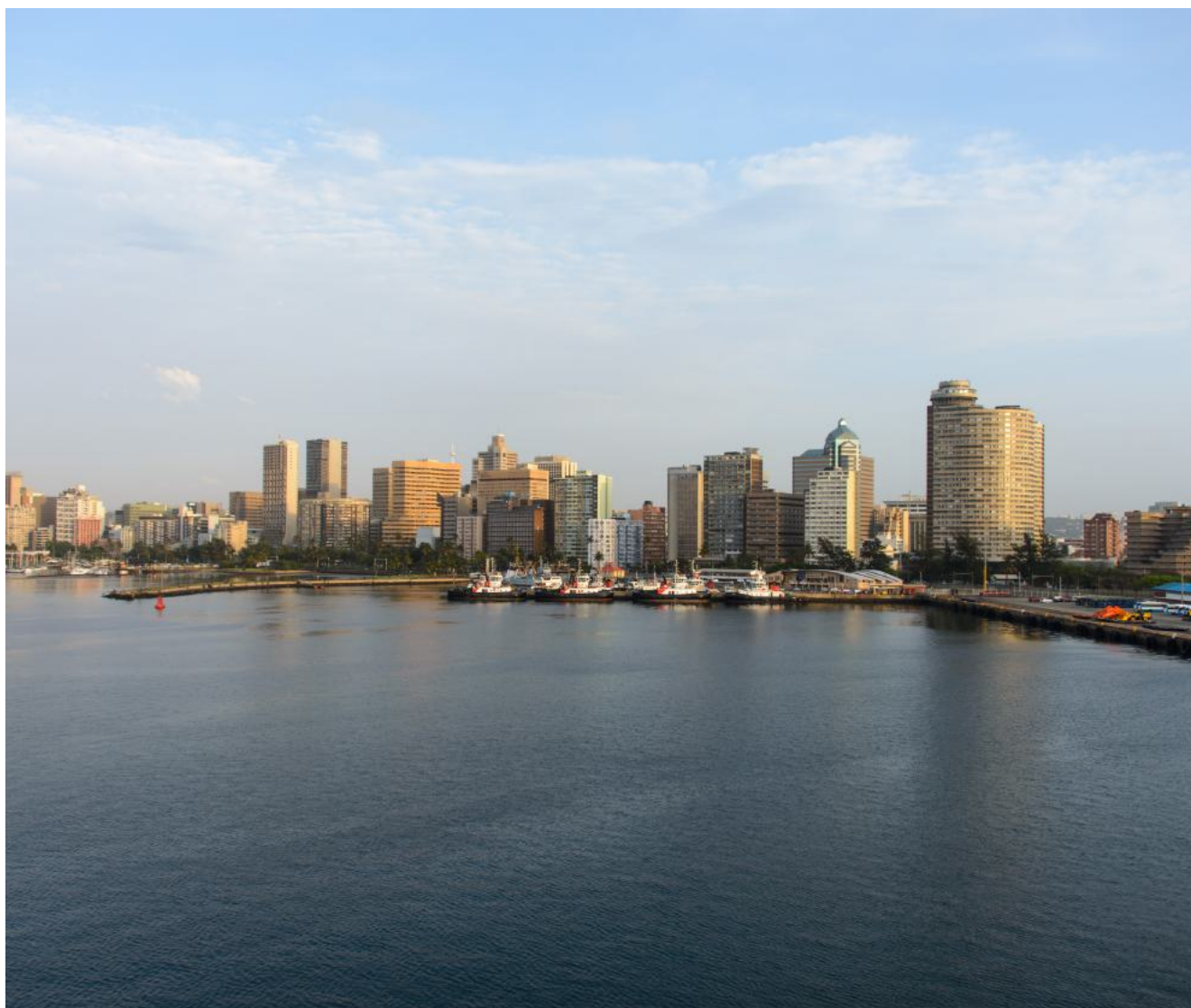
Even within the global shipping industry, women remain significantly underrepresented. Of the world's approximately two million seafarers, only about twenty-four thousand are women, representing just 1.3 per cent of the global maritime workforce (LeClercq, 2024:100). Those who do enter the industry often face gender-based harassment, discrimination, and unsafe working conditions, particularly within hierarchical shipping structures that reinforce gendered power relations (LeClercq, 2024:101; LeClercq, 2024:113). In many cases, shipping companies lack policies that adequately address gender-based violence and harassment aboard vessels, leaving women vulnerable within these work environments (LeClercq, 2024:113).

In South Africa, women constitute approximately 30 per cent of the maritime workforce, despite representing more than half of the national population (Anno Frempong and Mwale, 2026:265). While progress has been made in increasing women's representation in certain leadership positions, significant disparities remain, particularly for black, coloured, and Indian women who remain underrepresented in technical, operational, and decision-making roles across the sector (Anno Frempong and Mwale, 2026:266). These disparities highlight the need for targeted interventions to address structural barriers and expand women's full participation in the maritime economy.

Women's economic empowerment is therefore increasingly recognised as both a human rights imperative and an economic necessity. As Bohler-Muller (2019) notes, women's equality should be recognised not only as a human rights issue but also as an economic issue, given the potential contributions women make to economic growth and development (Bohler-Muller, 2019:2). In light of this, women's economic empowerment involves processes that expand women's access to resources, markets, and decision-making power while improving their ability to shape their own economic outcomes and livelihoods (Bohler-Muller, 2019:2). These goals are also reflected in international frameworks such as Sustainable Development Goal 5, which calls for gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls, and Sustainable Development Goal 10, which seeks to reduce inequalities and promote inclusive economic participation (Dube and Tekwa, 2025:187).



Within this broader context, the maritime and ports sector presents both significant opportunities and persistent challenges for gender transformation. The sector holds enormous potential for economic growth, trade expansion, and job creation, yet its benefits remain unevenly distributed across gender and socio-economic lines. It is against this backdrop that the CGE, the PRSA, and the B-BBEE Commission convened this stakeholder engagement. From the perspective of the three institutions, the dialogue was necessary to examine how regulatory frameworks, policy measures, and economic participation mechanisms can be strengthened to ensure that women are not excluded from the opportunities emerging within the maritime economy. For the CGE in particular, the engagement represented an important step toward fulfilling its constitutional mandate to promote gender equality by ensuring that economic sectors critical to national development are also spaces where women can participate, lead, and benefit equitably.



Port Durban view from sea



3. Collaborative Partner Profiles

Building on the broader context of the maritime and ocean economy outlined in the previous section, it becomes evident that addressing inequalities within the sector requires coordinated engagement among institutions responsible for economic regulation, oversight of economic participation, and gender equality monitoring. The stakeholder engagement was therefore convened through a collaborative partnership between the Ports Regulator of South Africa (PRSA), the Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment (B-BBEE) Commission, and the Commission for Gender Equality (CGE). Each of these institutions holds a legislated mandate that contributes to advancing structural change within South Africa's economic and governance landscape.

The collaboration reflects a shared recognition that structural change within the maritime sector cannot be achieved through isolated institutional interventions. Rather, sustained progress requires cooperation among regulatory authorities, economic empowerment bodies, and gender oversight institutions, such as the CGE, that collectively shape access to opportunities within the port system. Through this engagement, the partners created a platform for dialogue to examine the structural barriers to women's participation in the sector and explore practical strategies to advance equitable access to economic opportunities.

By bringing together institutions whose mandates intersect around accountability, economic participation, and gender equality, the engagement created space for a coordinated conversation on how regulatory frameworks, empowerment initiatives, and gender oversight mechanisms can work together to support inclusive participation within the maritime economy. The messages shared by representatives of these institutions, therefore, provided an important foundation for the discussions that followed during the engagement.

Messages from the Ports Regulator of South Africa, the B-BBEE Commission, and the Commission for Gender Equality:

3.1. Ports Regulator of South Africa (PRSA)

Message from:
Jowie Mulaudzi,
Chief Executive Officer,
Ports Regulator
of South Africa



The Ports Regulator of South Africa (PRSA) was established in terms of Section 29 of the National Ports Act No. 12 of 2005 and operates as a Schedule 3A public entity under the Department of Transport in accordance with the Public Finance Management Act No. 1 of 1999. The institution forms a key component of the regulatory architecture governing South Africa's commercial port system and is funded through fiscal allocations from the national government.

The core responsibility of the PRSA is to exercise economic regulation of the national ports system in line with the state's strategic objectives. In fulfilling this role, the regulator oversees several aspects of port operations, including regulating port tariffs and pricing structures, promoting equitable access to port facilities and services, monitoring the performance of the Transnet National Ports Authority, and adjudicating complaints and appeals related to port activities. These functions ensure that South Africa's ports operate in a fair, transparent, and aligned manner with national economic priorities.

In addition to these regulatory responsibilities, the PRSA has developed directives and policy principles that guide stakeholder participation in regulatory processes. These frameworks provide clarity on the procedures and standards expected during engagement with the regulator and help strengthen transparency and accountability within the port system. Through these mechanisms, the PRSA plays an important role in ensuring that the regulatory environment supports fair access to port infrastructure and services while enabling economic participation within the sector.

Within the context of this engagement, PRSA's involvement was particularly important in facilitating discussions on how regulatory frameworks can drive transformation in the maritime sector. By promoting equitable access to port services and monitoring compliance within the regulatory framework, the regulator helps address structural barriers that may restrict participation by historically disadvantaged groups, including women.



Message from:
Dr Maria Nonyana-
Mokabane,
 Chief Director: Legal
 Advice and Special
 Projects, Broad-
 Based Black Economic
 Empowerment
 Commission



3.2. Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment (B-BBEE) Commission

The B-BBEE Commission was established in terms of Section 13B of the Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment Act No. 46 of 2013 and operates with jurisdiction throughout the Republic of South Africa. The Commission functions independently and impartially, guided by the constitutional principles outlined in Section 195 of the Constitution. Its activities are financed through parliamentary appropriations and other lawful sources of income, and its financial records are audited annually by the Auditor-General.

The primary mandate of the Commission is to oversee, supervise, and promote adherence to the B-BBEE Act in the public interest. Its responsibilities include investigating complaints relating to B-BBEE compliance, addressing fronting practices, promoting awareness of

change policies, and analysing reports submitted by organs of state, public entities, and private sector organisations regarding their compliance with empowerment requirements. Through these activities, the Commission contributes to strengthening accountability and ensuring that gender transformation commitments translate into meaningful economic participation.

The legislative framework for economic transformation in South Africa is rooted in Section 9 of the Constitution, which provides for the redress of past discrimination and inequalities. This constitutional mandate is supported by legislation such as the Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act, the Employment Equity Act, and the B-BBEE Act. Collectively, these frameworks aim to promote inclusive economic participation and ensure that previously marginalised groups benefit from economic development.

Despite these frameworks, several structural challenges continue to slow the pace of transformation. Findings from the National Status Report of the B-BBEE Commission indicate that although Black people constitute approximately 92 per cent of the population, their ownership of the South African economy remains significantly lower, averaging around 30 per cent. Black woman-owned businesses, in particular, face technical and structural barriers, including limited access to funding, inadequate procurement opportunities, and reliance on single-client contracts.

The Commission has also identified several systemic challenges affecting the effective implementation of the B-BBEE Act. These include resistance to change by some institutions, limited transparency regarding ownership structures, the persistence of fronting practices, and low levels of compliance with transformation targets outlined in sector codes. Addressing these challenges remains essential for advancing inclusive economic participation and ensuring that transformation frameworks are effectively implemented across sectors, including the maritime and ports industries.

3.3. Commission for Gender Equality (CGE)

Message from: Prabashni Subrayan-Naidoo,
Deputy Chairperson,
Commission for
Gender Equality



The Commission for Gender Equality (CGE) is an independent constitutional body established under Chapter 9 of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa. Under Section 187 of the Constitution, the Commission is mandated to promote respect for gender equality and to monitor the protection, development, and realisation of gender rights across all sectors of society.

The authority of the CGE is further provided for in the Commission for Gender Equality Act No. 39 of 1996, which empowers the Commission to monitor, evaluate, investigate, research, educate, advise, and report on gender-related matters. Through these powers, the CGE plays an important role in advancing gender justice and addressing

the structural conditions that sustain gender-based discrimination within South African society.

Within the context of economic development, the CGE helps ensure that gender equality remains central to transformation across sectors. The Commission monitors the gender responsiveness of institutional policies and practices, investigates complaints of gender discrimination, and provides guidance and oversight to government and other stakeholders on policy measures to promote gender inclusion. In addition, the Commission conducts research and public education initiatives to strengthen understanding of gender rights and advance the principles of constitutional democracy.

The CGE's involvement in this engagement aligns with its broader responsibility to identify and address systemic barriers that limit women's economic participation. By working with regulatory bodies and transformation institutions, the Commission ensures that gender considerations are incorporated into decisions on economic governance. This is especially important in sectors like the maritime and ports industries, where women have long faced obstacles to entering technical roles, holding leadership positions, and accessing economic opportunities.

Through this collaboration with the PRSA and the B-BBEE Commission, the CGE contributes to strengthening accountability and ensuring that transformation initiatives respond to the lived realities of women across different communities. The partnership, therefore, reflects a shared commitment to advancing inclusive economic participation and ensuring that the benefits of transformation reach those who have historically been excluded from opportunities in the maritime sector.



4. Importance of the Engagement

Building on the institutional partnership described in the previous section, the stakeholder engagement held on 6 December 2024 represented a deliberate effort to confront persistent gender inequalities within the maritime and ports sector. Convened by the CGE, the PRSA, and the B-BBEE Commission, the dialogue created a platform for examining how economic transformation and gender equality intersect in one of South Africa's most formidable industries.

The timing of the engagement was particularly significant. Hosted during the 16 Days of Activism Against Gender Based Violence and Femicide (GBVF) campaign, the discussions highlighted the interconnected nature of economic exclusion, structural inequality, and gender-based vulnerability. Here, participants reflected on how women's limited access to economic opportunities often reinforces broader patterns of marginalisation and power imbalances, particularly within industries historically dominated by men.

Despite the scale and economic significance of the sector, women remain significantly underrepresented across maritime industries. During the engagement, participants reflected on data indicating that women's representation in technical maritime roles remains extremely limited, with participation estimated at below 2 per cent in some specialised operational positions. Similarly, women's participation in ownership, leadership, and high-value economic activities within the sector remains below thirty per cent. These figures were shared during the discussions to illustrate the persistent gender disparities that continue to shape the maritime workforce, despite the existence of transformation policies intended to promote greater inclusion.

Beyond statistical indicators, these inequalities were also reflected in the lived experiences of women working in the maritime environment. Participants spoke about navigating spaces that were historically designed around male-dominated organisational cultures, where women often face structural barriers to advancement. These experiences reinforced a key theme that emerged throughout the engagement: that transformation policies alone are insufficient to produce meaningful change. Effective transformation requires sustained institutional commitment, practical implementation mechanisms, and a shift away from entrenched norms that continue to exclude women from full participation in the sector.

The engagement, therefore, created an opportunity for stakeholders to critically reflect on the institutional structures that shape participation in the maritime economy. Participants examined how regulatory frameworks, governance arrangements, and organisational practices either support or hinder progress towards gender inclusion. For the CGE, the dialogue reaffirmed its constitutional responsibility to ensure that commitments to gender equality are translated into practical outcomes across economic sectors. For the B-BBEE Commission and the PRSA, the engagement provided a space to reflect on their oversight roles in strengthening transformation mechanisms and addressing gaps between policy commitments and actual industry practices.



To guide the dialogue, four key questions were posed to participants; these questions helped frame the discussions and allowed stakeholders to examine the structural dynamics shaping the maritime sector collectively.

1. What defines the maritime sector?

Participants reflected on the broad, interconnected nature of the sector, encompassing shipping logistics, marine engineering, port operations, maritime law, and associated service industries. Despite the diversity of opportunities in this ecosystem, participants acknowledged that entry into the sector remains difficult for many women. Barriers such as highly technical industry terminology, the cost of professional certification, and exclusionary workplace cultures were identified as factors that limit women's access to maritime careers.

2. Who is responsible for governing the sector?

The discussions also explored the complex governance structures that regulate maritime activities in South Africa. Participants reflected on the roles of institutions such as the Transnet National Ports Authority (TNPA), the South African Maritime Safety Authority (SAMSA), and the B-BBEE Transport Sector Council (B-BBEE TSC). Concerns were raised regarding fragmented oversight, such as overlapping mandates and inconsistent enforcement of transformation objectives across regulatory bodies. Participants also highlighted the need for stronger integration of gender considerations within maritime governance frameworks.

3. Where is decision-making power located?

Stakeholders further examined where authority and influence are concentrated within the sector. Much of the decision-making power in the maritime industry currently lies with large state-owned enterprises and private shipping companies, particularly in procurement, licensing, and port operations. Participants emphasised the importance of expanding participation in decision-making processes, strengthening transparency, and ensuring that civil society organisations and women-led enterprises are meaningfully included in shaping sectoral transformation.

4. What is the current state of women's participation?

Participants widely agreed that progress towards gender inclusion has been uneven and often slow. Although certain initiatives have created new opportunities for women within the sector, structural barriers continue to limit advancement into senior technical and leadership positions. Stakeholders highlighted the absence of mentorship networks, limited exposure to maritime career pathways in rural communities, and insufficient institutional support for women entering the industry. These factors were identified as symptoms of deeper resistance to transformation that persists across many parts of the sector.



These discussions reinforced the view that the maritime sector is at a crucial point in its transformation. While the sector holds enormous potential for economic development and job creation, its long-term sustainability depends on ensuring that opportunities within the industry are accessible to a broader and more diverse workforce. The engagement, therefore, served as a vital platform for collective reflection. With this, the participants emphasised that meaningful transformation would require moving beyond symbolic commitments towards practical interventions that expand support for women's advancement within the sector.

The insights identified from these discussions laid the foundation for deeper engagement during the panel sessions that followed. The next section of the report, therefore, reflects on the key themes, experiences, and perspectives shared during the panel discussions.



Portrait of a senior woman working at industrial international containers port terminal



5. Reflections on Panel Discussions and Insights

Following the framing discussion outlined in the previous section, a central component of the engagement was a series of panel discussions that highlighted the voices and experiences of women working in the maritime and port sectors.

Participants included representatives from the Commission for Gender Equality (CGE), the Ports Regulator of South Africa (PRSA), the Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment (B-BBEE) Commission, the Transnet National Ports Authority (TNPA), the South African Maritime Safety Authority (SAMSA), the B-BBEE Transport Sector Council, the eThekweni Maritime Cluster (EMC), Women in Maritime in East and Southern Africa (WOMESA), the Maritime Business Chamber, and Youngship. The engagement was also attended by representatives from community organisations, emerging maritime entrepreneurs, and women from rural maritime communities seeking greater access to opportunities within the sector.

The diversity of participants reflected a shared understanding that advancing gender equality in the maritime sector requires coordinated institutional and industry-wide change. In this report, this change refers to the restructuring of access to economic opportunities, decision-making power, and institutional support to address historical gender imbalances and expand women's full participation in the sector. This includes not only increasing representation but also addressing the structural and cultural conditions that continue to shape exclusion within maritime environments.

The importance of these discussions must be understood within the broader context of persistent gender inequalities in South Africa. Despite constitutional commitments to equality, the country continues to experience deep structural disparities across economic sectors. As noted by Dube and Tekwa (2025:197), "three decades into democracy, South Africa continues to grapple with deepening inequalities despite constitutional commitments to gender equality and societal adherence to Ubuntu principles". Within this context, the maritime sector reflects broader patterns of economic exclusion that continue to limit women's full participation in industries historically dominated by men.

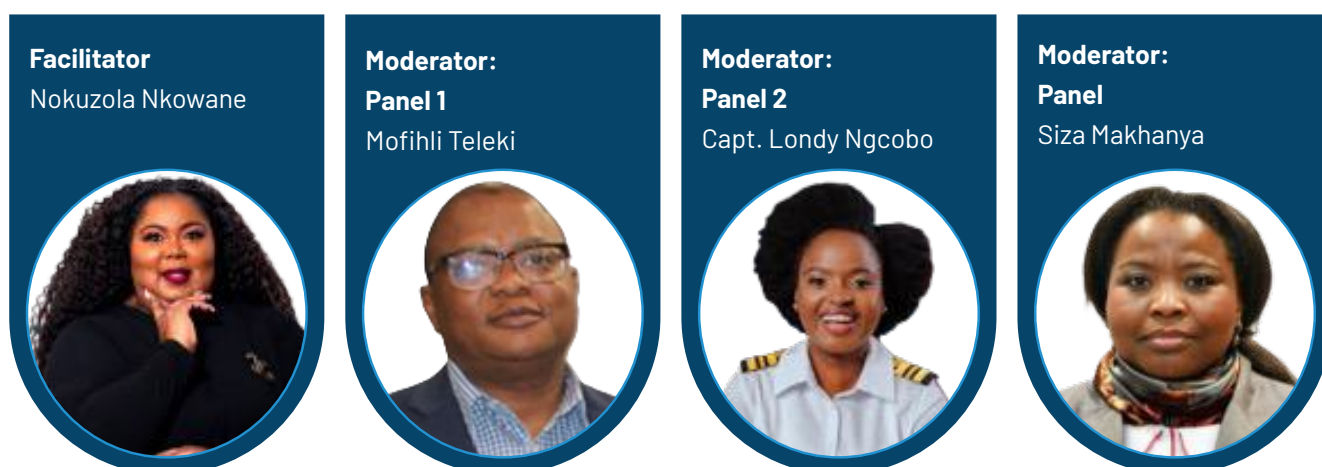
The discussions also resonated strongly with global development frameworks that emphasise inclusive economic participation. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) highlight the principle that development processes must "leave no one behind", drawing attention to marginalised groups who remain excluded from economic opportunities, including women (Bohler-Muller, 2019:1). In particular, Sustainable Development Goal 5 focuses on the empowerment of women across political, economic, social, and cultural spheres. At the same time, Goal 14 promotes the sustainable use of oceans and marine resources (Bohler-Muller, 2019:2). Within the context of the blue economy, these goals intersect in important ways, as advancing women's participation in maritime industries contributes not only to gender equality but also to the sustainable development of ocean-based economies (Bohler-Muller, 2019:2).



With this understanding, the engagement featured three panel discussions that explored women's participation in the maritime sector from complementary perspectives: regulatory oversight, institutional leadership, and industry representation. The structure of the discussions reflected the recognition that transformation requires action at multiple levels of the maritime governance system.

5.1. Meet the Facilitator and Moderators

The panel discussions were guided by a facilitator and moderators who ensured that the dialogue remained focused, inclusive, and responsive to the issues raised during the engagement.



The facilitator and moderators played an important role in guiding the discussions, ensuring diverse perspectives were heard and that the conversations remained grounded in the engagement's objectives.

5.2. Panel 1: Regulatory and Policy Perspectives on Transformation

Following the introductory reflections that framed the engagement's objectives, the first panel turned to the regulatory and policy environment governing gender equality and equitable economic participation in the maritime sector. This discussion explored the mandates of oversight institutions responsible for promoting transformation, monitoring compliance, and ensuring equitable access to economic opportunities within the port system. In doing so, the panel provided an institutional perspective on how legislative frameworks and regulatory mechanisms enable or constrain women's access to economic participation in the maritime economy.

The panel included the following representatives:

- Dr Maria Nonyana-Mokabane (Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment Commission)
- Prabashni Subrayan-Naidoo (Commission for Gender Equality)
- Jowie Mulaudzi (Ports Regulator of South Africa)
- Trudie Nichols (B-BBEE Transport Sector Council)



Drawing on their respective institutional mandates, the panellists began by reflecting on the regulatory environment governing the maritime and ports sector and the role oversight institutions play in advancing gender equality. The discussion examined how regulatory bodies, transformation agencies, and policy frameworks are expected to work together to ensure fair participation within the port system. While participants acknowledged that South Africa has established a strong legislative foundation to promote economic inclusion, the discussion shifted to the persistent gap between policy commitments and institutional practice within the sector.

Several speakers noted that although policies exist to promote transformation and economic participation, the effectiveness of these frameworks ultimately depends on consistent implementation, coordination between institutions, and a clear commitment by industry stakeholders to uphold transformation objectives. Without these elements, regulatory systems risk functioning as compliance exercises rather than mechanisms that expand women's opportunities in the maritime economy.

During the discussion, Prabashni Subrayan-Naidoo emphasised the constitutional responsibility of institutions to advance gender equality across all sectors of the economy. Reflecting on the continued marginalisation of women within the maritime industry, she stated that, "We cannot sit here thirty years into democracy and continue to litigate issues that are fundamentally about equality". Her remarks reflected broader frustration among participants with the slow, uneven progress toward advancing gender equality within the sector. The discussion emphasised the need for institutions to move beyond policy commitments toward measurable, accountable progress in women's participation in the sector. In this regard, the panel emphasised the role of oversight institutions in ensuring that gender transformation frameworks are not only implemented but also actively monitored to produce visible change.

The discussion also raised concerns regarding the accessibility of transformation mechanisms for emerging enterprises. Participants noted that regulatory frameworks, such as the B-BBEE system, are often complex and difficult to navigate, particularly for small businesses and women entrepreneurs seeking to enter the maritime sector. Stakeholders explained that while these systems are designed to promote economic inclusion, the administrative and technical requirements for compliance often serve as barriers to entry, particularly for women-owned and emerging enterprises and new entrants. Without accessible guidance, simplified processes, and institutional support, these frameworks may reproduce the very exclusion they are intended to address rather than facilitate participation.

As the conversation developed, attention shifted to the broader ecosystem required to support women entering the sector. Panellists highlighted the importance of stronger collaboration between government departments responsible for education, skills development, and economic transformation. Participants emphasised that meaningful participation in the maritime industry is shaped long before labour market entry, through access to information, early exposure, and structured support pathways. Early exposure to maritime career pathways, targeted training



opportunities, and access to specialised skills development programmes were identified as essential for expanding women's participation within the sector.

Without such early exposure and structured support, the specialised terminology, technical qualifications, and operational requirements associated with maritime professions can become barriers to entry rather than pathways to opportunity. Strengthening coordination among education systems, training institutions, and maritime industry stakeholders was therefore identified as a necessary intervention to ensure that women are better positioned to access opportunities within the sector.

5.3. Panel 2: Institutional Authorities and Access to Opportunities

Building on the regulatory and policy reflections raised in the previous panel, the second panel shifted the conversation to the role of key maritime authorities in implementing these frameworks within ports and across the broader maritime system. While the first panel explored the legislative and regulatory environment shaping inclusion, this session focused on how institutional authorities translate these commitments into practical opportunities within the sector. The discussion, therefore, examined the responsibilities of maritime institutions in creating conditions that support women to access, participate in, and advance within the industry.

Moderated by Captain Londy Ngcobo, the panel featured:

- Adv. Phyllis Difeto, Acting Chief Executive Officer of the Transnet National Ports Authority (TPNA)
- Mbalenhle Golding, Acting Chief Executive Officer of the South African Maritime Safety Authority (SAMSA)

The discussion began by examining the role of the TPNA in managing South Africa's commercial port system and ensuring equitable access to port infrastructure. Adv. Phyllis Difeto explained that the TPNA serves as the landlord authority, overseeing the country's eight commercial seaports. In this capacity, the institution carries a legislative responsibility to ensure fair, transparent, and non-discriminatory access to port services while promoting the participation of previously disadvantaged groups within maritime operations.

Reflecting on the progress made within the institution, Difeto emphasised that advancing gender equality does not occur automatically but requires deliberate institutional action. She highlighted the growing presence of women in harbour master positions as an example of how intentional leadership decisions can shape representation in historically male-dominated roles. She shared that:

"Of the eight harbour masters in South Africa, four are now women. In 2015, all eight were men. This shows that when institutions make a deliberate effort, representation can change."



While acknowledging this progress, Difeto also noted that the maritime sector remains a highly technical and demanding environment. As a result, women entering the sector must often navigate specialised training requirements, technical expertise, and workplace cultures shaped by historically male-dominated operational structures.

The conversation then turned to the broader role of maritime authorities in influencing industry standards and workplace environments. Mbalenhle Golding of the South African Maritime Safety Authority (SAMSA) reflected on SAMSA's role as a regulator overseeing maritime safety and the sector. She emphasised that institutions must demonstrate internal commitment to gender equality if they expect industry stakeholders to follow similar commitments.

"It is very hard to influence stakeholders when we ourselves are not transformed. We are working to ensure that SAMSA sets the example."

Golding further highlighted SAMSA's Gender-Based Violence at Sea programme, an initiative aimed at addressing safety concerns faced by women working aboard vessels and in port environments. The programme focuses on improving reporting mechanisms, raising awareness of harassment, and strengthening institutional responses to gender-based violence within maritime workplaces. Through such initiatives, SAMSA seeks to address the unique risks in maritime work environments while helping create safer, more inclusive workplaces.

As the discussion progressed, the moderator, Captain Londy Ngcobo, drew attention to the structural barriers that continue to affect access to opportunities within the maritime sector. She noted that while institutions may introduce programmes to promote inclusion, practical challenges such as licensing costs, accreditation requirements, and industry-specific terminology can create additional obstacles for emerging professionals. As she reflected on this, she stated that:

"Accreditation and licensing are expensive, and the language of the industry can be difficult to understand. Organisations must help decode this space so that women can access opportunities."

Her remarks emphasised that improving access to opportunities requires more than institutional commitments. It also requires deliberate efforts to simplify entry pathways, provide mentorship, and ensure that individuals seeking to enter the sector are equipped with the knowledge and support necessary to navigate its complex regulatory and technical landscape.

5.4. Panel 3: Industry Associations and Voices from the Sector

Following discussions on regulatory frameworks and institutional responsibilities, the final session shifted the focus to the lived realities of women working in the maritime and ports sector. While the previous panels examined how policy frameworks and institutional authorities shape access and participation within the industry, this discussion created a platform for representatives of maritime associations, professional networks, and industry organisations to reflect on how these



systems are experienced in practice. The panel therefore brought forward voices from within the sector, highlighting the everyday challenges women encounter when seeking to access opportunities, establish businesses, and build careers in maritime environments.

Moderated by Sizakele Makhanya, the panel included:

- Zenzile Gwamanda (eThekweni Maritime Cluster)
- Adv. Phyllis Difeto (Women in the Maritime Sector in East and Southern Africa – WOMESA)
- Thanda Nkosi (Maritime Business Chamber)
- Nongaba Bengu (YoungShips)

The session emphasised the important role that industry associations and professional networks play in bridging the gap between policy frameworks and women's lived experiences in the sector. Participants noted that while legislation and institutional programmes lay important foundations for gender equality and inclusion, progress within the maritime industry also depends on support structures built through collaboration, mentorship, and collective advocacy.

A central theme emerging from the discussion was the importance of visibility in challenging entrenched gender norms within the maritime sector. Zenzile Gwamanda of the eThekweni Maritime Cluster emphasised that the limited presence of women in operational and leadership roles continues to reinforce perceptions that maritime professions are reserved primarily for men. Increasing the visibility of women within these spaces, therefore, plays an important role in reshaping these perceptions and encouraging greater participation. She stated that:

"Women must be visible in this industry. If we do not see women in these spaces, it becomes difficult for others to imagine themselves entering the sector."

Gwamanda also referred to initiatives such as the All-Women's Crew programme, which demonstrates the operational capabilities of women within maritime environments. By placing women in roles traditionally held by men, these initiatives aim to challenge stereotypes and showcase the technical and leadership capacities women bring to the sector.

The discussion also highlighted the role of professional networks in supporting young professionals entering the maritime industry. Organisations such as YoungShip were recognised as important platforms for mentorship, networking, and professional development. These networks provide young professionals with opportunities to connect with experienced industry professionals, gain insight into maritime career pathways, and access resources that support their growth within the sector.



At the same time, participants spoke candidly about the barriers that continue to inform women's experiences within the maritime economy. Several contributors noted that despite growing awareness of gender equality within the sector, women are still frequently excluded from operational and decision-making spaces. One participant reflected on the persistence of this exclusion, noting that many organisations continue to perpetuate inequalities within boardrooms and leadership structures, explaining that women are often "relegated to catering and open cafés", rather than given opportunities to participate in the technical and operational aspects of the industry.

Participants also described the challenges faced by women entrepreneurs attempting to establish themselves within the sector. Access to procurement opportunities, funding, and contracts remains limited, particularly for new entrants. One participant described the experience of navigating the sector as a continuous struggle, stating:

"My experience with Transnet is always a struggle. Black women consistently face the label of incompetence, despite not knowing who is sabotaging them within the industry".

This reflection highlighted the intersection of gender, race, and power in the maritime sector and the ways structural barriers continue to shape women's experiences in the industry.

Participants further emphasised that sustaining women's participation within the sector requires more than increasing entry opportunities. Women must also be able to remain in the sector, grow professionally, and access leadership and procurement opportunities. As one participant noted during the discussion, progress requires collective effort and shared advocacy, emphasising that:

"Women should speak with one voice to ensure that change is happening".

The discussion, therefore, highlighted the importance of stronger collaboration among industry associations, regulatory institutions, educational bodies, and civil society organisations to address these barriers. In addition, the participants highlighted the need for initiatives that expand mentorship opportunities, strengthen professional networks, and improve access to funding and procurement pathways for women-owned businesses in the maritime sector. By centring the voices of women working directly within the industry, this panel provided a critical grounding for the engagement. The lived experiences shared during the discussion offered valuable insight into how policies, institutional initiatives, and industry practices interact to shape women's participation within the maritime economy.

The reflections shared across the three panel discussions collectively illustrated the complexity of advancing gender equality within the maritime sector. While the first panel examined the regulatory and policy frameworks shaping equitable participation, the second panel focused on the role of maritime authorities in implementing these commitments within institutional structures. The final panel highlighted the lived realities of women working in the sector, emphasising the practical challenges that continue to shape access to opportunities, professional advancement, and economic participation. Together, these perspectives revealed both the progress made and the structural barriers that remain. The insights emerging from these discussions therefore provide an important foundation for identifying the key themes that characterised the engagement and inform the analytical observations presented in the following section.



5.5. Key Themes Emerging from the Panel Discussions

The three panel discussions collectively revealed several recurring themes regarding the current state of gender equality and inclusion in the maritime and ports sector. Although each panel approached the issue from a different institutional perspective, the discussions intersected around several structural challenges that continue to shape women's participation in the industry. Participants recognised that while certain initiatives and policy commitments have created opportunities for progress, the overall pace of change remains uneven. Women's participation in maritime industries remains constrained by a combination of institutional, economic, and cultural barriers that limit access to opportunities within the ocean economy.

These discussions reflected a broader global pattern in the blue economy, in which women's contributions are frequently underrecognised or confined to informal, lower-value activities. As Bohler-Muller (2019:4) notes, the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) has argued that women's participation within the blue economy often remains "invisible and where it is visible, it is confined to the non-monetised core economy". Within the South African context, these patterns are further shaped by historical inequalities and structural barriers that continue to affect women's access to economic resources, training opportunities, and decision-making positions within strategic sectors such as maritime transport and port operations. The themes emerging from the panel discussions, therefore, provide valuable insight into areas where further institutional intervention is required to advance gender equality and equitable participation within the sector.

5.5.1. Representation and Leadership in the Maritime Sector

One of the key themes that emerged from the discussions was the continued underrepresentation of women in leadership and technical positions within the maritime sector. Although participants recognised efforts by some institutions to improve women's participation, particularly in specialised roles such as harbour masters and maritime regulators, these examples were seen as exceptions rather than the norm across the industry.

Additionally, some participants emphasised that representation must extend beyond tokenism. Women must be fully integrated into decision-making structures, procurement processes, and operational leadership positions where strategic decisions about the maritime sector are made. Without such participation, progress risks remaining limited to visible representation without addressing deeper structural inequalities within the industry.



5.5.2 Professional Pathways

Another key theme identified from the discussions concerned the role of education and training in shaping women's participation within maritime industries. Participants repeatedly highlighted the technical nature of the maritime sector, noting that specialised skills, professional certifications, and industry knowledge are essential for entry into many maritime professions. Research has identified the lack of access to education and training as one of the most significant barriers affecting women's participation in the blue economy. Bohler-Muller (2019:3) notes that addressing education and training gaps is a central element in improving women's participation within ocean-based industries. Without targeted efforts to expand training opportunities, women may remain excluded from many technical roles within the sector.

Furthermore, participants also emphasised that the maritime sector is characterised by specialised terminology and technical language that may be unfamiliar to individuals who have not previously been exposed to maritime environments. As a result, early exposure to maritime career pathways is essential to ensuring that young women can pursue the training required to enter the sector. Several speakers highlighted the importance of strengthening collaboration among educational institutions, government departments, and maritime organisations to introduce maritime career awareness programmes at earlier stages of the education system.

5.5.3. Outreach and Inclusion of Marginalised Communities

The discussions also highlighted the importance of expanding outreach initiatives to introduce communities to maritime opportunities that have historically had limited access to the sector. Participants noted that many maritime training programmes and career development initiatives are concentrated in urban centres, leaving rural communities with limited exposure to maritime industries. This issue is particularly significant in coastal provinces such as KwaZulu-Natal, where many communities are geographically close to maritime infrastructure but economically disconnected from the opportunities it generates. Participants emphasised that outreach initiatives must therefore extend beyond occasional awareness campaigns and instead form part of sustained institutional engagement with communities. This will ensure that women from rural and marginalised communities can access maritime career pathways, which is essential if the sector is to become more inclusive. Without such efforts, existing inequalities may be reproduced within the emerging blue economy, limiting the sector's potential to contribute to broader equitable socio-economic participation.



5.5.4. Workplace Safety and Gender Based Violence in Maritime Environments

Another critical theme unearthed from the discussions concerned workplace safety and the experiences of women working within maritime environments. Participants highlighted that maritime workplaces often involve isolated environments, hierarchical organisational structures, and working conditions that may expose women to harassment and gender-based violence. Research on women's participation within maritime industries indicates that workplace conditions can present unique challenges for women professionals. For example, LeClercq (2024:100) notes that even basic workplace equipment, such as seafarers' uniforms, has historically been designed exclusively for male bodies, reflecting broader assumptions about who belongs within maritime professions.

International maritime institutions have increasingly recognised these challenges. The International Maritime Organisation (IMO) has introduced a gender strategy to promote women's participation in the maritime workforce and support initiatives in education, training, and professional development (LeClercq, 2024:112). Although women remain underrepresented within seafaring occupations, the number of women entering the profession increased by approximately 46 per cent between 2015 and 2020, suggesting that new opportunities are gradually emerging within the sector (LeClercq, 2024:112). However, participants emphasised that, although initiatives such as SAMSA's Gender-Based Violence at Sea programme represent important steps toward improving workplace safety, sustained institutional commitment is required to ensure that maritime workplaces become safe and inclusive environments for women professionals.

5.5.5. Strengthening Collaboration and Institutional Accountability

The final theme identified from the discussions was the need for stronger collaboration among institutions responsible for regulating, governing, and supporting the maritime sector. Participants emphasised that structural change within the sector cannot be achieved by individual organisations acting independently. Instead, visible progress requires coordinated action between regulators, government authorities, educational institutions, industry associations, and civil society organisations. They also emphasised the importance of strengthening accountability mechanisms to ensure commitments to inclusion and equitable participation are consistently implemented across the sector. This includes developing clearer monitoring frameworks, collecting reliable data on women's participation within maritime industries, and ensuring that institutions are held accountable for meeting inclusion targets.



In this regard, participants highlighted the importance of research and data collection in supporting evidence-based policy development. As Bohler-Muller (2019:3) argues, there is a growing need for research focused specifically on women's participation in the blue economy to better understand both their contributions and the barriers they continue to face. Together, these themes illustrate both the progress that has been made and the challenges that remain in advancing women's participation within the maritime sector. While institutional initiatives and policy commitments have created new opportunities, the discussions made it clear that sustained progress requires deliberate effort, coordinated action, and a long-term commitment to addressing structural inequalities within the industry.





6. Observations and Analysis

The discussions during the panel sessions opened space for deeper reflection on the structural conditions that influence women's participation in the maritime and ports sector. While the engagement highlighted several initiatives to expand access to opportunities, it also revealed persistent inequalities that continue to affect women's experiences across the industry. Awareness of gender disparities within the maritime economy has increased in recent years; however, improvements in access and participation remain limited in practice. Policy frameworks often articulate objectives for inclusion and equitable participation, while institutional practice and resource allocation do not consistently reflect these intentions. One contributor captured this frustration clearly, explaining that, despite frequent references to progress, "for many women, especially in rural areas, this sector still feels like a locked gate". This observation reflects a broader concern that access to maritime opportunities remains constrained by structural conditions that extend beyond individual effort or professional qualification.

These reflections resonate with wider national conversations regarding economic inclusion and structural change. South Africa's constitutional framework provides a strong basis for equality and non-discrimination, yet disparities in access to economic opportunities persist across sectors of the economy. Within the maritime industry, these disparities are reinforced through institutional cultures, regulatory complexity, and limited monitoring systems that restrict women's entry and advancement. Structural change, therefore, cannot be reduced to policy declarations or compliance exercises alone. Progress depends on deliberate institutional leadership, sustained financial investment, and practical implementation approaches that translate policy frameworks into tangible changes that expand access to maritime opportunities.

6.1. Progress in Women's Representation

Institutional examples shared during the engagement demonstrate that progress is possible when deliberate attention is given to structural change. The TNPA reported that four of the country's eight harbour masters are currently women, representing a significant shift from 2015, when men held all harbour master positions. This development was widely recognised as evidence that institutional leadership and focused interventions can begin to disrupt long-established patterns of exclusion within highly technical professions. It also illustrates how targeted institutional decisions can open pathways into roles that were previously considered inaccessible to women.

Despite these developments, representation across the broader maritime sector remains limited. Women continue to occupy a small proportion of senior leadership positions, operational decision-making roles, and procurement structures within the industry. Representation in numbers alone does not transform institutional power relations. Access to decision-making authority, economic participation, and leadership opportunities remains essential if women are to influence how resources and opportunities are distributed within the maritime environment. Without such access, increased visibility cannot alter the deeper structural dynamics that continue to regulate participation within the sector.



6.2. Barriers to Entry and Advancement

Barriers affecting entry into maritime professions continue to restrict the participation of many women. Access to the sector often requires navigating financial, educational, and institutional obstacles that disproportionately affect individuals from historically disadvantaged communities. Licensing requirements and specialised certification programmes involve substantial financial costs, making them difficult to access without scholarships, sponsorship, or institutional support. For many aspiring professionals, the financial burden associated with maritime training becomes a decisive obstacle before employment opportunities can even be considered.

These constraints are particularly noticeable for women living in rural areas or communities with limited exposure to maritime industries. Even when women succeed in obtaining the necessary qualifications, employment opportunities remain uncertain due to limited mentorship structures, career guidance programmes, and professional networks within the sector. The highly technical language used in maritime operations creates an additional barrier for individuals who encounter the sector later in their educational journeys. Many learners discover information about maritime career pathways only after completing their schooling, by which time the required educational preparation may already be out of reach.

Research examining the ocean economy reflects similar patterns. Entrepreneurs operating within this sector frequently encounter regulatory environments that are administratively demanding and difficult to navigate. Compliance requirements, licensing procedures, and institutional processes can create obstacles for emerging businesses seeking to establish themselves in the maritime industry (Zulu et al., 2023:8). Without targeted support mechanisms, these systemic constraints continue to limit entry into the sector for women and other historically marginalised groups.

6.3. Limited Outreach to Marginalised Communities

Attention was also drawn to the distribution of outreach initiatives promoting maritime careers. Several programmes currently exist to increase awareness of opportunities within the sector; however, many remain concentrated within major urban centres and rarely extend into rural or coastal communities. As a result, large segments of the population remain disconnected from industries that operate near their communities.

This pattern is particularly concerning in regions where communities live near maritime infrastructure while remaining excluded from the economic benefits generated by port activities. Women in these communities frequently have limited access to information about maritime training programmes, educational opportunities, or career pathways related to the ocean economy. Expanding outreach through schools, community organisations, and local networks would make maritime opportunities more visible to young people from diverse backgrounds. Many current outreach initiatives operate as short-term interventions supported through temporary



funding arrangements. Integrating such initiatives into long-term institutional planning and budgeting would create greater continuity. Sustained engagement is necessary if institutions are to ensure that women from marginalised communities can access the information, training, and mentorship required to pursue careers within the maritime sector.

6.4. Cultural and Structural Barriers

Institutional barriers intersect with cultural dynamics that continue to influence workplace experiences within the maritime sector. Professional environments within the industry have historically been associated with masculine identities, creating additional pressure for women seeking to establish themselves in operational roles. The expectation that women must continually prove their competence within male-dominated environments remains a recurring theme in professional narratives shared during the engagement.

Experiences described during the discussion pointed to subtle forms of exclusion that continue to affect workplace dynamics. Restricted access to mentorship opportunities, informal professional networks that often exclude women, and expectations that women must adjust their behaviour to navigate spaces originally designed without their participation in mind remain common challenges. One contributor described this experience directly, explaining that survival within the sector frequently requires women to conceal aspects of their identity, noting that “you have to be tough to survive. That means hiding who you are”. These reflections illustrate how organisational culture can perpetuate gender inequality even when formal policy commitments to inclusion are in place. Visible role models, institutional support structures, and deliberate cultural change within organisations therefore remain essential in addressing these dynamics and improving retention and advancement within the maritime workforce.

6.5. Policy and Legislative Gaps

Concerns were also raised regarding the adequacy of existing policy frameworks governing the maritime sector. Although South Africa has introduced several policies to promote economic inclusion and equitable participation, some regulatory instruments no longer fully reflect the realities of the contemporary ocean economy. Governance frameworks must evolve alongside industry changes if they are to remain effective.

The Commercial Ports Policy of 2002 was frequently cited as an example of legislation requiring revision to align with current priorities for inclusion and access. Greater integration of gender equality, economic inclusion, and equitable access to maritime opportunities within governance frameworks would strengthen regulatory oversight within the sector. Research on South Africa's ocean economy supports these concerns, noting that the maritime sector remains fragmented in several areas despite its strategic importance for national development (Zulu et al., 2023:2). Improved coordination between institutions responsible for regulating maritime activities and those tasked with advancing inclusive economic participation would assist in addressing these policy gaps.

6.6. Lack of Accountability Mechanisms

Another issue raised during the engagement concerns the limited accountability mechanisms for inclusion objectives in the maritime sector. Institutions such as the CGE, the PRSA, and the B-BBEE Commission exercise oversight, but enforcement measures are often applied inconsistently. Reporting processes are perceived as irregular, targets lack clarity, and institutions that fail to meet their responsibilities rarely face direct consequences.

One contributor summarised this concern clearly by explaining that effective institutional change requires clear accountability measures: *"If there are no penalties, there will be no change. Transformation must cost something if it's not delivered"*. These concerns reflect broader structural challenges within the maritime and transport sectors. Unequal access to funding, limited managerial capacity among emerging enterprises, and inconsistent implementation of empowerment policies continue to constrain progress across the industry (Zulu et al., 2023:4).

The engagement revealed both frustration with the pace of progress and strong determination among stakeholders to advance change. The maritime sector holds significant potential for economic growth and employment, particularly in coastal provinces such as KwaZulu-Natal, where ports such as Durban play a central role in national and regional trade. Realising this potential requires addressing the structural barriers that continue to restrict access to opportunities within the ocean economy. Expanding access to training, employment pathways, enterprise development opportunities, and leadership positions remains central to increasing women's participation within the maritime and ports sector. The next section therefore presents the recommendations identified during the engagement and outlines practical steps to strengthen women's economic empowerment and advance inclusive participation within the maritime industry.



*False Bay coast landscape with yachts boats jetty Long Beach and mountains in Simons Town
Cape Town Western Cape*



7. Recommendations for Moving Forward

The engagement produced a set of practical actions required to advance gender equality within the maritime and ports sector. These recommendations reflect the lived realities shared during the dialogue as well as the institutional mandates of the organisations represented in the room. Together, these recognise that progress in this sector depends on coordinated efforts. One contributor captured the urgency of the moment by noting that:

"We don't just need more women in the room; we need to change the room".

This statement reflects a broader challenge facing the sector: representation alone cannot alter institutional cultures or economic access patterns. Advancing women's participation, therefore, requires deliberate interventions that address entry pathways, institutional accountability, professional development, and visibility within the maritime economy.

7.1. Public Awareness and Education

Limited awareness of maritime careers continues to restrict entry into the sector, particularly among young women in rural, township, and coastal communities. Increasing awareness of the sector, therefore, remains an important first step in expanding the pipeline of women entering maritime professions. The CGE, working alongside the Department of Basic Education, the Department of Higher Education and Training, and industry partners such as the eThekweni Maritime Cluster(EMC)and YoungShip, can support the development of sustained public education initiatives focused on maritime opportunities.

These initiatives should prioritise accessible communication that explains maritime careers in clear language and introduces learners to the range of professions available in port operations, maritime safety, logistics, engineering, and ocean-based economic activities. School outreach programmes, career exhibitions, and community engagements in coastal provinces such as KwaZulu-Natal would allow these opportunities to reach learners who may otherwise have limited exposure to the sector. Partnerships with community radio stations, public broadcasters, and digital platforms can further expand the reach of these programmes. Presenting the stories of women already working in maritime professions will also help demonstrate that these career paths are achievable and relevant to young women from diverse backgrounds.



7.2. Research and Policy Analysis

The engagement highlighted the limited availability of data documenting women's participation within different segments of the maritime economy. Reliable information remains necessary to inform policy reform and assess the effectiveness of current initiatives aimed at expanding access and participation. The CGE, in collaboration with the B-BBEE Commission and the PRSA, can initiate sector-focused research examining women's participation across port-related economic activities.

Such research should examine the experiences of women-owned enterprises seeking access to procurement opportunities, the participation of women within technical maritime professions, and the barriers encountered by women from rural communities entering the sector. Findings from this work would contribute to ongoing discussions concerning the review of maritime policy frameworks, including the Commercial Ports Policy (2002), the National Ports Act (2005), and sector policy instruments linked to economic redress and participation within the B-BBEE framework. Presenting this evidence to Parliament and relevant portfolio committees would strengthen legislative responses to improve gender equality within maritime governance.

7.3. Addressing Systemic Barriers Through Legal and Investigative Action

The CGE possesses constitutional authority to investigate systemic discrimination and to convene hearings examining institutional practices that undermine gender equality. This mandate provides an opportunity to address barriers raised during the engagement. Investigative hearings involving institutions such as Transnet, the TNPA, and SAMSA would allow the Commission to examine issues including the high cost of maritime certification, barriers to procurement access for women-owned enterprises, and obstacles faced by new entrants seeking to enter the sector.

These hearings should focus on identifying practical interventions that can reduce barriers and improve institutional accountability. Recommendations arising from such processes should include clearly defined corrective actions and implementation timelines. Collaboration with the B-BBEE Commission and the PRSA would also strengthen monitoring of these outcomes and help ensure that institutional reforms are implemented in practice.

7.4. Strengthening Accountability Mechanisms

Progress in expanding women's participation within the maritime sector requires consistent monitoring systems capable of tracking women's participation across employment, procurement, and enterprise development. Strengthening accountability, therefore, remains an essential component of advancing gender equality within the sector. The CGE, working with the PRSA and the B-BBEE Commission, can support the development of gender-responsive indicators to be incorporated into existing regulatory reporting frameworks.



These indicators may include the number of women participating in port-licensed activities, the proportion of procurement opportunities awarded to women-owned enterprises, and the representation of women in technical and leadership positions across maritime institutions. Annual reporting against these indicators would allow oversight bodies to monitor progress and identify areas requiring further intervention. Transparent monitoring processes would also encourage institutions operating within the maritime sector to prioritise gender equality within their operational strategies.

7.5. Mentorship and Skills Development Support

Expanding women's participation in maritime professions also requires sustained investment in mentorship and professional development programmes. Training initiatives introduced by organisations such as the EMC and YoungShip demonstrate how mentorship, technical training, and networking opportunities can support young professionals entering the maritime workforce.

Greater collaboration between training institutions, maritime authorities, and industry associations would allow these programmes to expand their reach. This approach aligns with national policy instruments such as the Preferential Procurement Policy Framework Act and the National Skills Development Plan (2020–2030). Ensuring that women from rural communities and historically disadvantaged backgrounds are prioritised within these programmes will remain essential for widening access to maritime professions.

7.6. Visibility and Sector Advocacy

Increasing the visibility of women within the maritime sector remains essential for challenging long-standing perceptions that maritime work is primarily the domain of men. Media engagement strategies can play an important role in amplifying the presence of women working across maritime professions and leadership roles. Collaborative campaigns involving the CGE, maritime institutions, and industry associations can highlight the achievements of women operating within port operations, maritime safety, logistics, and related industries. Public storytelling initiatives, media partnerships, and digital platforms can help demonstrate the contributions women are making to the maritime economy. In addition to increasing public awareness, such visibility can encourage institutions within the sector to broaden recruitment and leadership pathways for women.



7.7. Empowerment Through Capacity Development and Monitoring

Efforts to expand women's participation in the maritime sector should also focus on strengthening professional confidence, technical expertise, and institutional knowledge among women entering the industry. Capacity development programmes designed by organisations such as the EMC and YoungShip already contribute to this objective through training workshops, networking opportunities, and professional exchange platforms.

Strengthening monitoring systems will be important for assessing the long-term impact of these initiatives. Data collection processes supported by the CGE and sector regulators can help track participation rates, employment outcomes, and the growth of women-owned enterprises in maritime industries. Continuous engagement with communities, training providers, and industry actors will also help ensure that programmes respond to the evolving needs of women entering the maritime workforce.

The engagement demonstrated that advancing gender equality in the maritime sector requires coordinated action across institutions responsible for regulation, economic transformation, and gender oversight. Through continued collaboration with sector partners, the CGE can play an important role in ensuring that the concerns raised during the engagement translate into practical institutional reforms. Sustained advocacy, monitoring, and policy engagement will remain essential to advancing a maritime sector in which women can access opportunities, participate fully in economic activities, and occupy leadership roles across the industry.

7.8. Transforming Organisational Culture and Embedding Gender-Responsive Practices

A critical area highlighted during the engagement is the need for deliberate change in organisational culture within the maritime and ports sector. Even when women gain access to training, employment, and leadership opportunities, many continue to encounter workplace cultures that remain exclusionary, male-dominated, or unresponsive to gender-specific needs. Substantive transformation, therefore, requires more than programmes; it requires shifting the norms, values, and internal practices that shape everyday experiences within maritime institutions. By embedding gender-responsive practices into organisational structures, the sector can address the cultural and institutional norms that have historically limited women's participation. These shifts not only support women entering and advancing within maritime professions but also contribute to a more inclusive, productive, and future-oriented maritime sector.



8. Conclusion

The stakeholder engagement on Women's Economic Empowerment in the Ports Sector provided an important platform for reflection on the current state of gender transformation within South Africa's maritime economy. Through dialogue between regulatory authorities, industry institutions, professional networks, and women working directly within the sector, the engagement illuminated both the progress achieved and the structural realities that continue to limit women's participation. The discussions demonstrated that while policy frameworks supporting gender equality exist within South Africa's legislative environment, access to economic participation within the maritime industry remains constrained by institutional practices, financial barriers, limited exposure to career pathways, and workplace cultures that have historically centred male participation.

The conversations held during the engagement also reinforced the idea that increasing women's participation within the industry is an important step, but on its own, is not sufficient to shift how opportunity, authority, and resources are distributed across the sector. Expanding women's participation, therefore, requires strengthening entry pathways, improving access to education and specialised training, supporting women-owned enterprises, and ensuring that institutional accountability mechanisms consistently and transparently monitor progress.

The voices shared during the panel discussions further emphasised that institutional frameworks and everyday workplace realities shape women's experiences within the maritime sector. Testimonies from women working in maritime environments illustrated the persistence of subtle forms of exclusion, professional isolation, and barriers to advancement that cannot be addressed solely through policy reform. Addressing these realities requires sustained institutional leadership, deliberate cultural change within maritime organisations, and stronger support structures that enable women to enter, remain in, and advance within the sector.

At the same time, the engagement highlighted the considerable economic potential of the maritime sector and its importance within South Africa's broader development agenda. As one of the country's most strategically significant industries, the maritime economy holds substantial opportunities for job creation, enterprise development, and regional economic growth, particularly in coastal provinces such as KwaZulu-Natal. Ensuring that women can participate fully in these opportunities is therefore both a constitutional responsibility and an economic priority. Expanding access to the sector strengthens not only gender equality but also the sustainability and resilience of the maritime economy itself.



The discussions also emphasised the importance of cooperation between institutions responsible for regulating maritime activities, promoting economic participation, and advancing gender equality. The partnership between the CGE, the PRSA, and the B-BBEE Commission demonstrates the value of coordinated institutional engagement in addressing complex sectoral challenges. By aligning regulatory oversight, monitoring, and gender equality advocacy, these institutions are well-positioned to influence how structural change unfolds in the maritime sector.

For the CGE, the engagement represents a continuation of its constitutional mandate to ensure that gender equality is realised not only in law but also in practice across all spheres of society. The insights generated during the dialogue provide an important evidence base that can inform future advocacy, research, policy engagement, and oversight activities undertaken by the Commission. Through continued engagement, the CGE can help strengthen accountability and ensure that women's experiences remain central to discussions on economic participation and access across strategic sectors of the economy.

Ultimately, the engagement demonstrated that advancing women's economic empowerment within the maritime sector is both achievable and necessary. The pathways identified during the discussions offer a clear direction for institutions seeking to expand access, strengthen support systems, and address the structural conditions that continue to limit women's participation. By translating these insights into sustained institutional action, South Africa could promote a maritime sector in which women are present and actively shaping the industry as professionals, entrepreneurs, and leaders.

While the engagement primarily centred on women's economic participation, it is important to note that issues relating to disability inclusion and gender diversity were not extensively explored during the discussions. This highlights an area for further engagement to ensure that future dialogues adopt a more intersectional approach to access and participation within the sector.





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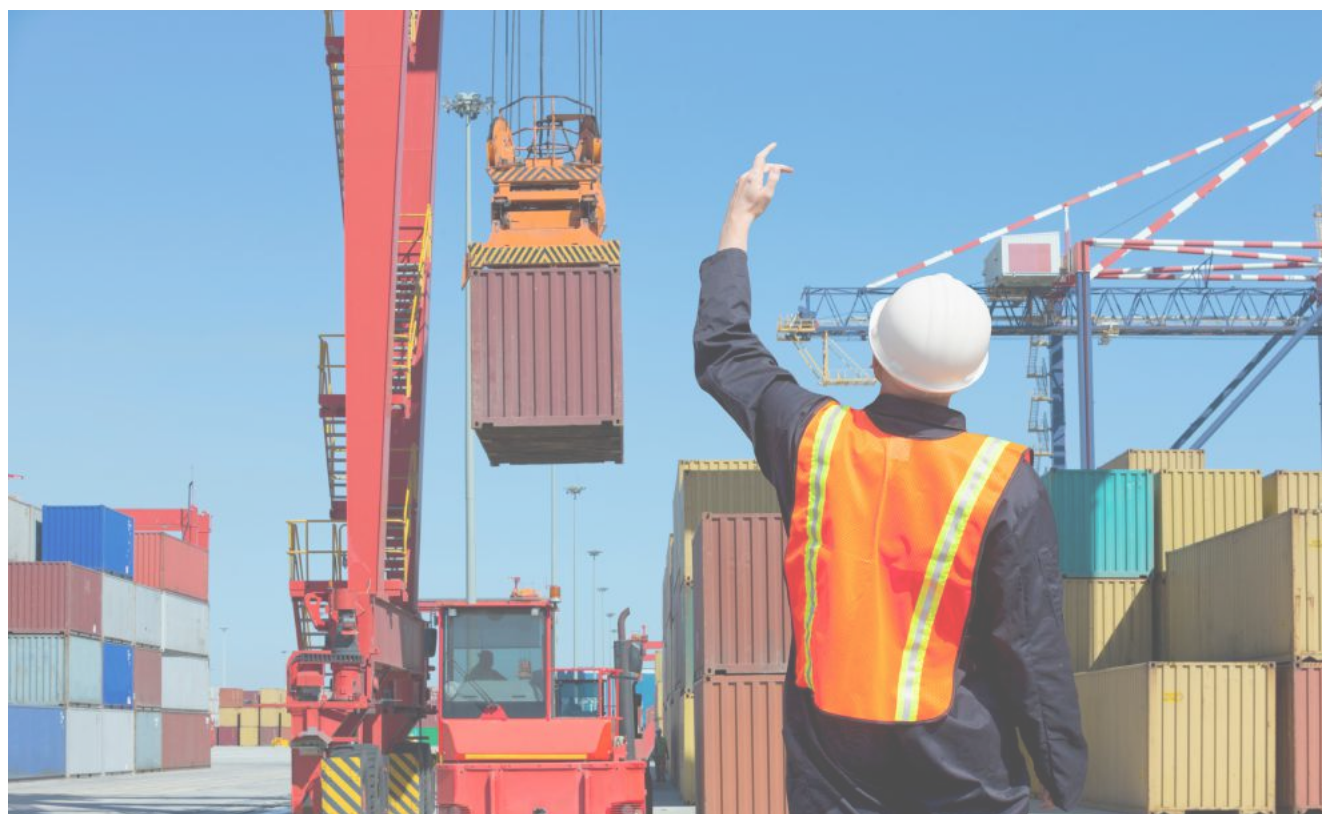
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Commission for Gender Equality



HEAD OFFICE

2 Kotze Street
Women's Jail,
East Wing Constitution Hill
Braamfontein, 2017
Tel: +27 11 403 7182



GAUTENG

267 Lillian Ngoyi Street
Praetor Forum Pretoria, 0001
Tel: +27 12 341 6090



EASTERN CAPE

3-33 Phillip Frame Road
Waverly Office Park Chiselhurst
East London, 5247
Tel: +27 43 722 3489



LIMPOPO

Cnr Grobler & Schoeman Street
106 Library Gardens Square,
1 st Floor Polokwane, 0700
Tel: +27 15 291 3070



KWAZULU-NATAL

40 Dr A.B Xuma Road
Commercial City, Suite 1219
Durban, 4000
Tel: +27 31 305 2105



FREE STATE

49 Charlotte Maxeke Street
Fedsure Building, 2nd Floor
Bloemfontein, 9300
Tel: +27 51 430 9348



NORTHERN CAPE

143 Du Toitspan Road
NPO Building
Kimberley, 8300
Tel: +27 53 832 0477



NORTH-WEST

38 Molopo Road
Mahikeng, 2745
Tel: +27 18 381 1505



@CGE_ZA



Commission for Gender Equality



@CommittssionForGenderEquality



General Enquiries - info@cge.org.za



Media Enquiries- media@cge.org.za



Legal Complaints: Gender - Enquiries@cge.org.za



www.cge.org.za

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