



GENDER EQUALITY IN THE BLUE ECONOMY: FROM EVIDENCE TO ACTION

POLICY BRIEF



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Gender Equality in the European Blue Economy

From Evidence to Action

Unlocking the full potential of Europe's Blue Economy requires addressing persistent gender inequalities that limit access to talent, innovation, leadership, and entrepreneurship across maritime sectors. WIN-BIG results demonstrate that integrated approaches combining women centred skills development, mentoring, networking, visibility, and policy support can drive meaningful change. **This Policy Brief presents the key findings from the WIN-BIG project and outlines practical policy actions that can strengthen gender equality, improve workforce resilience, and provide a roadmap towards a more inclusive, resilient, and competitive Blue Economy.**

Context and Introduction

Europe's Blue Economy is central to achieving EU ambitions for climate neutrality, sustainable growth, innovation, and maritime resilience. It is also a sector undergoing rapid transformation, driven by the expansion of offshore renewable energy, the digitalisation of maritime industries, new and high tech emerging sectors, and growing investment in sustainable ocean-based solutions. However, as the world navigates uncertainty and economic instability, the future of sustainable and consistent growth is tied to gender parity. According to the World Economic Forum Global Gender Gap Report 2025, at the current rate of progress, full global gender parity remains 123 years away. Globally, 68.8% of the gender gap has been closed, leaving 31.2% gender gap remaining.

Despite growing positive trends and opportunities in the Blue Economy, women remain underrepresented across many industries of the sector and continue to face barriers to participation, progression, and leadership. Today, women represent 42% of the EU Blue Economy workforce, but with uneven distribution across EU sea basins and blue industries. Women have achieved near-parity in some areas of the Blue Economy workforce (Academia and research, Services and Public Administration mostly), but remain underrepresented in leadership, technical, operational, and decision-making roles and across emerging industries too. Despite progress, 31% of women in the EU Blue Economy still report being harassed¹.

The evidence is increasingly clear: gender inequality in the Blue Economy is not simply a workforce issue. It is a strategic challenge affecting the sector's ability to attract talent, foster innovation, and build a resilient workforce capable of meeting future demands.

The WIN-BIG project (Women in Blue Economy Intelligence Gathering and Capacity Boosting), funded through the European Maritime, Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund (EMFAF), set out to better understand these challenges and identify practical solutions. Through gender analysis across six European sea basins, large-scale surveys, stakeholder engagement, capacity-building activities, mentoring programmes, and visibility initiatives, WIN-BIG has generated one of the most comprehensive evidence bases on gender equality in the European Blue Economy to date.

The findings reveal that while regional contexts differ, many of the challenges faced by women are remarkably consistent across sectors and geographies. The project also demonstrates that targeted interventions, particularly when combining mentoring, skills development, networking, visibility, and policy engagement, can contribute to meaningful and lasting change.

¹ WIN-BIG EU-wide gender status survey.

Women in the Blue Economy:

Key Findings from the WIN-BIG Survey

Evidence base from 1,000+ professionals across 6 European sea basins reveals a persistent participation-leadership gap and structural barriers.

Survey Scope & Participation

1,000+

Professionals Surveyed
Across 6 Sea Basins



43%

Baltic and
Mediterranean
Sea Basins

Highest participation
(not including Black Sea).



38%

North Sea Basin

Lowest participation of
any basin.



■ Academia & R&D,
Public Administration,
Tourism
■ High Tech, Robotics,
Marine Renewable Energies

Participation stays concentrated in a few sectors;
high-tech and emergent sectors have the least.

The Participation-Leadership Gap

42%

Workforce Representation

Approaching parity in total numbers.



Leadership Deficit

Significantly underrepresented in leadership &
decision-making roles.



Atlantic Basin Reflects EU Reality

Trends observed in the Atlantic Sea basin are the most
representative of the overall European Union status.

Organizational Culture vs. Structural Reality



78%

Perceive Inclusive Cultures

Majority feel leadership supports
gender equality (77%).

VS.



41%

Lack Formal Equality Plans

Many organizations operate without
a formal Gender Equality Plan (GEP).

Barriers to Safety and Advancement



31%

Report Workplace
Harassment

Harassment rates rise to
57% in the North Sea and
49% in the Arctic Sea.



55–68%

See Fewer
Advancement
Opportunities

More than half perceive
reduced career growth
compared to male
counterparts.



46%

Concerned About
Pay Disparity

Nearly half identify
unequal pay as an ongoing
challenge.

The Path Forward



A Shared European Challenge

Similar patterns of inequality observed across
all sea basins, indicating a systemic issue.



Coordinated Action is Required

Interconnected barriers across participation,
safety, and advancement must be addressed
through unified efforts.

What the Evidence Tells Us

Gender inequality is a structural challenge across the Blue Economy

Women's participation in the Blue Economy varies. While women are well represented in many marine research, policy, and sustainability-focused roles, they continue to be underrepresented in technical, operational, engineering, and offshore occupations.

Representation also declines significantly at senior and decision-making levels, highlighting persistent barriers to leadership and career progression.

Importantly, these patterns are visible across all sea basins. While local contexts vary, the evidence points to a common structural challenge rather than a collection of isolated sectoral issues.

The challenge is not simply attracting women into the Blue Economy. It is ensuring they can progress and lead within it.

Participation does not always translate into progression

Increasing numbers of women are entering Blue Economy sectors, but participation alone is not delivering gender equality. Women continue to report obstacles to advancement, reduced access to influential networks, and fewer opportunities to reach leadership positions.

The result is a persistent gap between participation and progression, with significant implications for talent retention and leadership diversity across the sector.

The challenge is no longer access alone; it is progression, retention, and leadership.

Workplace culture remains a critical issue

Survey findings suggest that gender inequality extends beyond representation. Women continue to report exclusion from informal networks, gender bias, discrimination, and barriers created by male-dominated workplace cultures, particularly in technical and operational roles. Concerns relating to workplace culture, pay equity, job security, and harassment remain evident in several Blue Economy sectors, particularly within technical and offshore work environments.

Women and men also report different perceptions of workplace equality. Women more frequently identify discrimination, exclusion and barriers to progression, while men tend to report more positive perceptions of organisational inclusivity. This gap can affect whether inequality is recognised and prioritised within organisations.

Recruitment alone is not enough; women must be able to thrive, progress, and remain in the sector.

Structural barriers continue to limit opportunity

Across regions and sectors, women face a number of interconnected barriers that reinforce one another, including:

- Underrepresentation in leadership and decision-making structures
- Limited access to professional networks and sponsorship opportunities
- Barriers to entrepreneurship and finance
- Skills gaps and underrepresentation in STEM pathways
- Challenges associated with work-life balance and caring responsibilities
- Weak gender-disaggregated data and monitoring systems

STRUCTURAL BARRIERS CONTINUE TO LIMIT OPPORTUNITY

Across regions and sectors, women face a number of interconnected barriers that reinforce one another.



Together, these barriers constrain both **entry into** and **progression** within the Blue Economy.



ISOLATED INTERVENTIONS ARE UNLIKELY TO SUCCEED WHERE BARRIERS ARE INTERCONNECTED.

Integrated approaches deliver stronger results

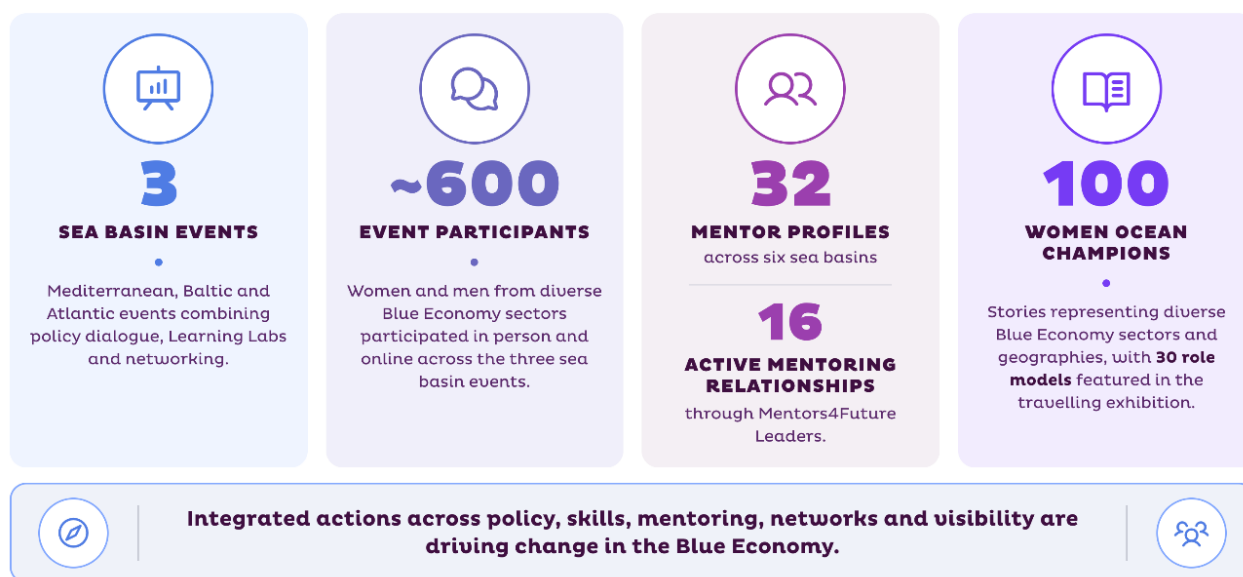
A key lesson emerging from WIN-BIG is that isolated interventions are rarely sufficient. Training programmes have greater impact when combined with mentoring. Mentoring is more effective when supported by strong professional networks. Visibility initiatives are most successful when linked to wider organisational and policy change. Effective interventions also engage men as allies and advocates, recognising gender equality as a shared organisational and sectoral responsibility.

The project's Learning Labs, Mentors4Future Leaders programme, Women Ocean Champions initiative, and sea-basin engagement activities demonstrate the value of integrated support systems that build skills, confidence, leadership capacity, networks, and visibility simultaneously.

The greatest impact comes from combining skills development, mentoring, networking, visibility, and policy support.

WIN-BIG IN ACTION

Tested approaches supporting skills, networks, mentoring and visibility
across the European Blue Economy



Figures reflect WIN-BIG project activities and outputs (2023–2026).

What Works: Lessons from WIN-BIG

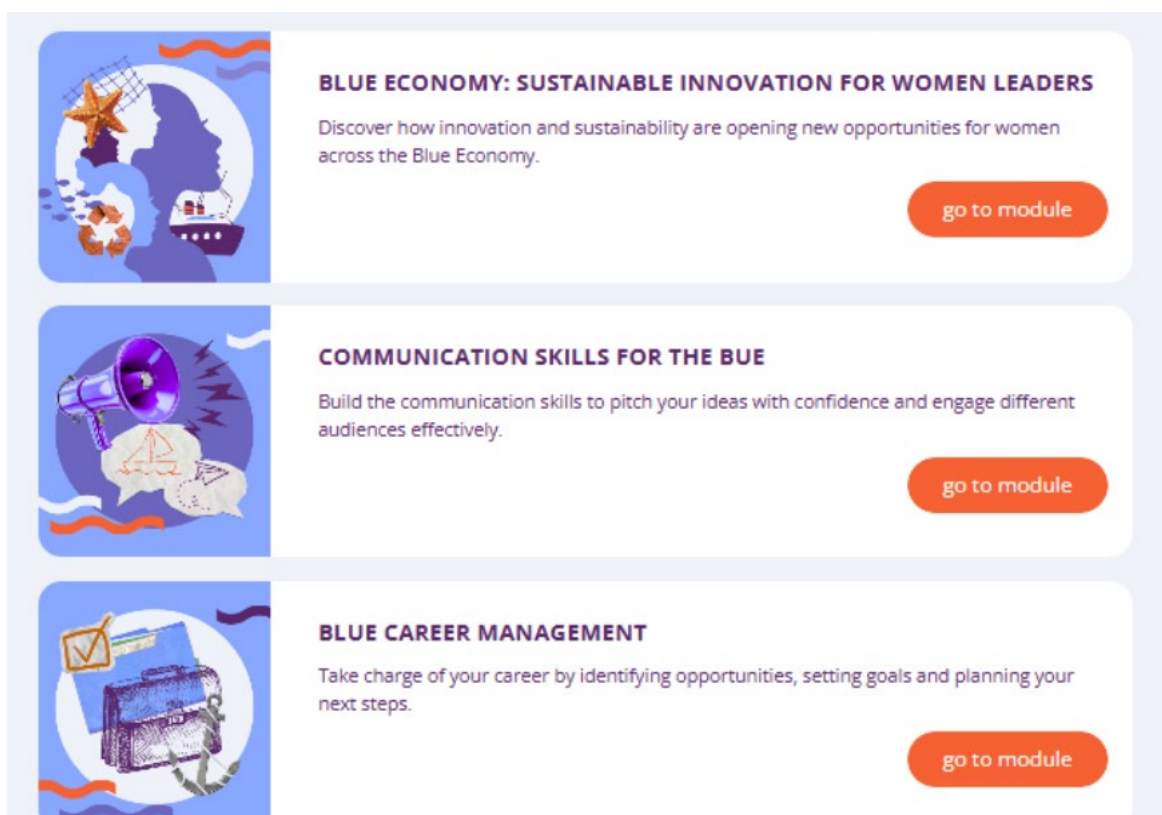
A major contribution of WIN-BIG is that it moved beyond identifying problems and tested practical responses. The project demonstrated that the strongest outcomes occur when interventions are delivered as part of an integrated support system rather than through standalone activities.

Learning Labs

Targeted training activities helped participants develop:

- Leadership and negotiation skills
- Entrepreneurial capacity and business planning tools
- Communication skills
- Career planning capabilities

Participants reported increased confidence and improved ability to navigate career opportunities.



The image displays three module cards from the Learning Labs, each with a blue header, an illustration, a title, a description, and a 'go to module' button.

- BLUE ECONOMY: SUSTAINABLE INNOVATION FOR WOMEN LEADERS**
Discover how innovation and sustainability are opening new opportunities for women across the Blue Economy.
[go to module](#)
- COMMUNICATION SKILLS FOR THE BUE**
Build the communication skills to pitch your ideas with confidence and engage different audiences effectively.
[go to module](#)
- BLUE CAREER MANAGEMENT**
Take charge of your career by identifying opportunities, setting goals and planning your next steps.
[go to module](#)

Mentors4Future Leaders

WIN-BIG designed, developed and implemented a complete and structured mentoring programme – Mentors4Future Leaders. Mentoring programmes like these helped participants:

- Expand professional networks
- Access guidance from experienced professionals
- Improve career planning and progression

The greatest benefits were observed when mentoring was linked to wider support structures and networking opportunities.

Women Ocean Champions

Visibility initiatives showcased diverse role models working across the Blue Economy. These included the [Women Ocean Champions book](#) and exhibition, as well as the documentary *Women from the Sea – Significant Gestures, EU Episode*. Collectively, these and other visibility activities increased awareness of career opportunities, challenged stereotypes, strengthened confidence, and demonstrated the value of visibility as a tool for empowerment and cultural change.



Sea Basin Engagement

Regional events demonstrated the value of bringing together policymakers, industry representatives, researchers, students, and practitioners to combine policy dialogue with practical capacity-building actions. Participants also highlighted the value of dedicated women-centred spaces that support confidence-building, peer learning, and professional exchange.

***Skills development + mentoring + professional networks + visibility + policy support =
greater impact than any intervention delivered alone***

Policy Priorities & Recommendations

Gender equality in the Blue Economy must be addressed as a structural and strategic priority, requiring coordinated action.

Empowering the Blue Horizon: 6 Policy Priorities for Gender Equality



1



Strengthen women's representation and influence in leadership, governance, and strategic decision-making

Support meaningful participation in governance structures, advisory bodies, investment decisions, and leadership positions across Blue Economy sectors.

2



Invest in structured mentoring, targeted networking, and female-led community-building

Support long-term programmes that connect women across sectors, career stages, and regions, helping to build professional networks and leadership pathways.

3



Scale women targeted capacity-building initiatives

Embed targeted training initiatives, such as Learning Labs, within regional, national, and EU-level programmes to strengthen skills, confidence, entrepreneurship, and career progression.

4



Improve women's access to entrepreneurship, innovation ecosystems, and finance

Reduce structural barriers that limit women's participation in entrepreneurship, business growth, innovation, and investment opportunities.

5



Promote women role models' visibility, representation and cultural change

Support role-model initiatives, expert directories, and storytelling outputs, while promoting women's representation in events, media, advisory groups and technical discussions.

6



Strengthen monitoring, accountability, and measurable gender equality targets across Blue Economy policies, programmes, and governance structures

Strengthen collection of gender-disaggregated data and incorporate clear gender equality objectives into Blue Economy policies, programmes, and funding instruments.



Legacy & Resources

Through its research, training, mentoring, networking, and visibility activities, WIN-BIG has created a lasting suite of resources to support a more gender-equal Blue Economy, including Gender Status Reports, Learning Lab training materials, mentoring tools and the Mentors4Future Leaders database, Women Ocean Champions resources, the Women from the Sea documentary, and the WIN-BIG Roadmap for Capacity Building for Women in the EU Blue Economy. We thank the women and men across Europe who contributed their time, experiences, and expertise throughout the project. Together, these outputs provide a foundation for translating evidence into action and sustaining progress beyond WIN-BIG.

This Policy Brief presents a synthesis of the key findings and recommendations emerging from WIN-BIG, drawing on evidence generated through survey data from more than 1,000 Blue Economy professionals across Europe's six sea basins, alongside a range of capacity-building and stakeholder engagement activities. Readers can find the full suite of WIN-BIG resources on the project website, including detailed analysis, practical tools, case studies, and policy guidance to support organisations, policymakers, educators, industry stakeholders, and practitioners in advancing gender equality and women's leadership across Europe's Blue Economy.

Key Publications and Resources:

Core Evidence Base

WIN-BIG Gender Status Reports & Infographics

WIN-BIG Project. European Cross-Basin Findings
WIN-BIG Project. Arctic Sea Gender Status Report
WIN-BIG Project. Atlantic Ocean Gender Status Report
WIN-BIG Project. Baltic Sea Gender Status Report
WIN-BIG Project. Black Sea Gender Status Report
WIN-BIG Project. Mediterranean Sea Gender Status Report
WIN-BIG Project. North Sea Gender Status Report

National Gender Status Reports & Infographics

WIN-BIG Project. Ireland Gender Status Report
WIN-BIG Project. Portugal Gender Status Report
WIN-BIG Project. Spain Gender Status Report
WIN-BIG Project. Public Deliverables Series

Strategic and Policy Orientated Outputs

WIN-BIG Project. Roadmap for Gender Equality in the European Blue Economy (forthcoming, 2026).

Capacity Building and Training

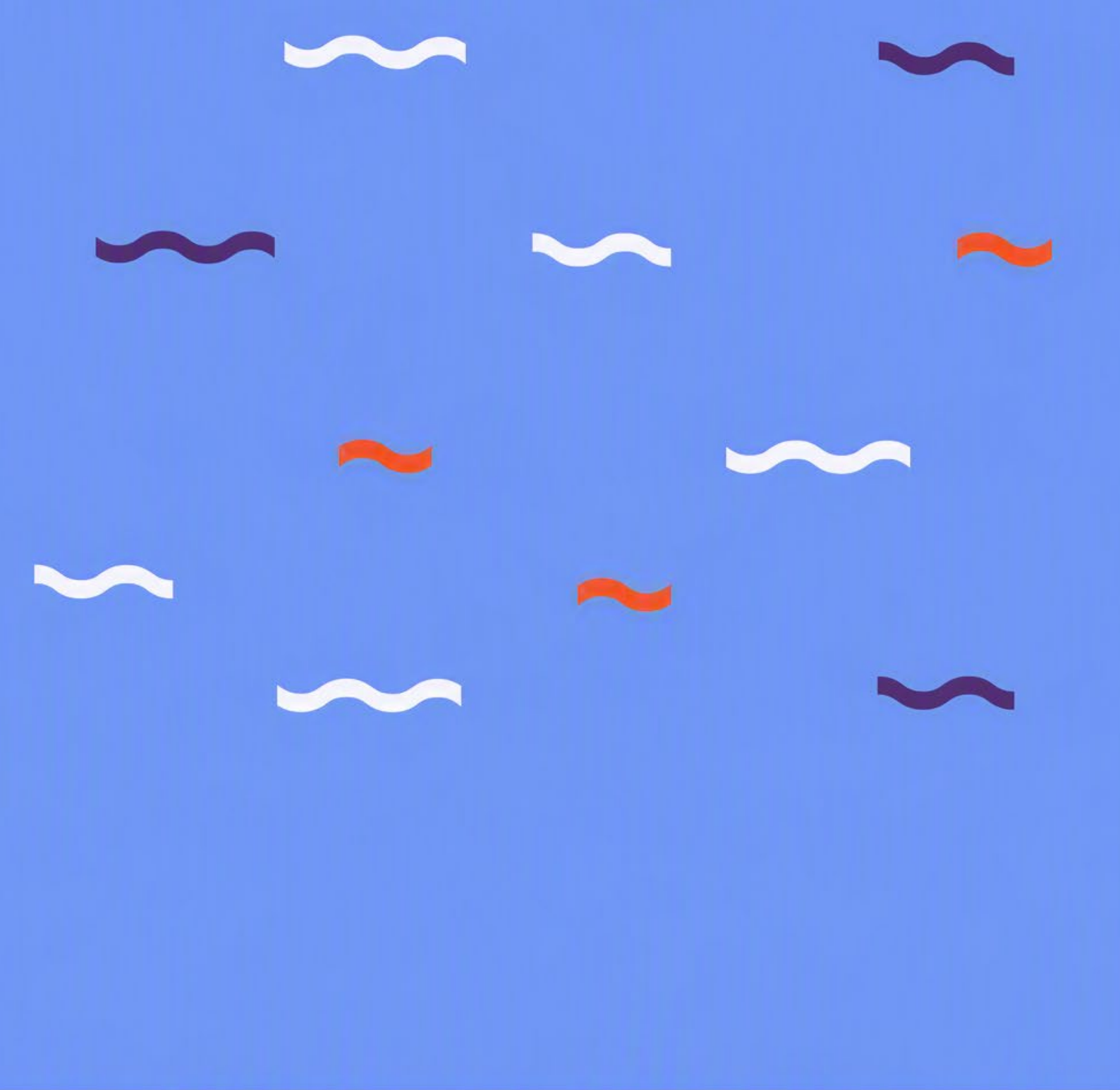
WIN-BIG Learning Labs and Training Materials
WIN-BIG MOOCs and Capacity-Building Resources
Mentors4Future Leaders Mentoring Programme and Mentor Database

Visibility and Role Model Resources

Women Ocean Champions: 100 stories and portraits of women shaping Europe's Blue Economy
Women from the Sea Documentary Series and Storytelling Resources

Readers are also encouraged to explore the complementary resources developed through the WINBLUE project (<https://winblue-project.eu/>), which includes gender equality plans, good practice guidance, monitoring and benchmarking resources, and the WINBLUE Strategic Agenda. Together with WIN-BIG, these resources provide a strong foundation for driving gender equality, skills development, women's leadership, and institutional change across Europe's Blue Economy.

Visit the WIN-BIG website to access the full suite of project outputs
www.winbigproject.eu



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