

Women in Conservation: Cherchez les femmes!

- By Maaike Manten



Men and women, working together (image Dan Rothberg)

This 7th and last article in the series about 'women in conservation' lists the main lessons learned from the 5 '[Women in Healthy Sustainable Societies](#)' (WHSS) projects that were implemented between May 2014 and March 2015, at five Eastern Afrotropical KBAs in Kenya and Uganda. These 5 projects, funded by Conservation International (CI) and managed by the BirdLife International Africa Partnership Secretariat, aimed to provide a better understanding of the gender dimensions of conservation, and support women's involvement in environmental decision-making.

Find here [all 6 previous stories, about the 5 projects](#) and the experience exchange meeting that took place in Kenya in February 2015

This is a summary of the main lessons learned:

Lesson 1: A lot of people still need convincing that women are important in biodiversity conservation

Surprisingly, many conservationists (but maybe more unsurprisingly, most of them men :-)) still ask the question: "Do we need to talk about women? We are trying to protect birds!" And: "Does involving women make our conservation projects any better?" The answer to both questions is: *of course, yes*. If nothing else, women are major natural resource users, and if we don't think about them and their specific roles when we design our conservation projects, we may very well end up on the wrong track (and fail). This was shown clearly by a [WHSS-funded research project in Bwindi Impenetrable Forest in Uganda](#), carried out by the Institute of Tropical Forest Conservation (ITFC), which showed that a failure by local conservation structures to meet women's needs to feed their families, forced some of these

women to look for alternatives that include reverting to the illegal collection of natural resources from the nearby Protected Area. So maybe we should ask instead: "How can we make everybody understand that involving women in all components of conservation (research, planning, action, decision-making, institution-building, monitoring, evaluation... etc) is common sense?" As much as the term is over-used, a lot of *awareness raising* still seems to be necessary...



Starting to see the light ©CEPF RIT

Lesson 2: Behind every great woman, there has to be a great man

Usually this saying goes the other way around, but - indeed - times they are a-changing. The lesson here is that gender empowerment does not happen with/by/for women only - the best (or only?) way to make it work is by involving men and women together. A community-based CBO at the Kikuyu Escarpment in Kenya, KENVO (Kijabe Environment Volunteers), used the WHSS grant to pilot the idea of "[men for women](#)" i.e. to create a group of men who support the efforts to empower women. This is not entirely new; through the [WHSS exchange meeting](#), the grantees learned about [Men Engage Kenya](#) and [Men Engage Uganda](#) which are part of a global alliance to encourage men and boys in achieving gender equality. The representative from KIWOCEDU, a WHSS grantee in Uganda, appreciated the idea of 'men for women' so much that she will replicate this at her own project site, the Echuya Forest in Uganda. However, in other places this may not yet be so easy.



Lesson 3: A lot of it is about culture - but even cultures can change

Two WHSS-funded projects tried to understand, and change, the perception of pastoralist societies in Kenya that "women don't need to be involved" in natural resource management or conservation. A [research project implemented by Miriam Westervelt](#) through the British Institute in Eastern Africa (BIEA) showed that women in the Loita Hills (South Nguruman) have a great understanding of what is happening with their resources, and a lot of it is not good news. Still, they are hardly involved in any decision-making about them - mainly

because they are not allowed to speak in public gatherings. Fauna & Flora International (FFI) found similar attitudes among the staff of [community conservancies in Northern Kenya](#) ; there, if a man speaks out as a 'man for women', e.g. to support women as conservancy leaders, they are challenged by their peers: "Are you now a woman?!" It will take time to change this attitude. But it is not impossible - change has happened before, and it will happen again.



You can use but you cannot talk © Miriam Westervelt

Lesson 4: Money talks

Two WHSS-funded projects had a specific focus on creating and sharing revenue. The above-mentioned [KIWOCEDU project in Uganda](#) (KIWOCEDU stands for Kigezi Initiative for Women and Children Empowerment and Development Uganda) supported a range of income-generating activities, most successfully mushroom-growing; this not only improved people's family income and enhanced their food production, but it also reduced domestic conflicts between husbands and wives: when the men increasingly started to see the women as contributors to the family income, they treated them with more respect. The [ITFC project in Uganda](#) (see also lesson 1) showed that it is also a good idea to involve women in the community decision-making process about how to spend the money derived from, in this case, ecotourism at the Bwindi Impenetrable Forest National Park. It will ensure that the needs of men, women and children in the community will be met more fairly; it will reduce illegal activities; and it will result into a greater appreciation of the Protected Area by all beneficiaries.



Peace, love and mushrooms © KIWOCEDU

Lesson 5: Power to the people

Last but not least, each and every project, most literally the [KENVO project in Kenya](#) , helped to empower local women to speak in public meetings. This was not as easy as it sounds. The obstacles women face when they want to be heard, are many and big. It starts with getting invited, but it doesn't end there. You have to be lucky that a meeting takes place at a time when, and in a location where you can attend. What about your daily chores, who will do them when you are away? How do you find the resources to travel? And where do you leave your baby, if you have one? Once you are at the meeting, will anybody ask you for your opinion, or are you just there to make the organisers look good? Can you even speak, without having a man standing up on your behalf? And then - can you use the right words, can you make the right references to policies, do you speak the right 'language' to

say the appropriate thing in front of the audience and the people behind the high table? All of this, and more, came to the fore during the 5 WHSS projects. And even though the projects were short and cheap, and the challenges were formidable, [each and every project made a change](#).

It's all possible

The WHSS programme has shown that women and conservation go very well together. Therefore, *cherchez les femmes* next time you design a conservation project!

The 5 WHSS small grant projects have also shown that it is possible to deliver tangible results with small amounts of money. And because CI only funded projects at [Eastern Afromontane Key Biodiversity Areas](#), all improvements as a result of these 5 projects also supported our conservation efforts in the [Eastern Afromontane hotspot](#).

We would like to acknowledge the financial support from Conservation International, and the technical support from Kame Westerman, to this unique small grants initiative.

For a location of the 5 projects, please see the interactive map [here](#).

More resources

- Interview with Kame Westerman (Conservation International's Gender Advisor) at [YALE Environment 360](#)
- Conservation International's [Gender Integration Guidelines](#)
- BirdLife International's brand new [Position on Conservation and Gender!](#)
- Some highly relevant Fauna & Flora International documents on [gender and conservation](#)
- Elisabeth Kiørboe, Diana Vinding, Martha Salazar, Vibeke Tuxen and Helle Munk-Ravnborg (2005) *Integrating Indigenous and Gender Aspects in Natural Resource Management - Guidelines for Practitioners*. IGNARM, Denmark. [http://ignarm.wwf.dk/resources/Guidelines for Practitioners.pdf](http://ignarm.wwf.dk/resources/Guidelines%20for%20Practitioners.pdf)
- Leisher, C. (2014) *Checklist of key questions to ask when doing a rapid gender assessment for a new natural resource management project in a developing country*. TNC. www.nature.org/science-in-action/leading-with-science/gender-conservation-checklist.pdf
- Sasvari, A., Aguilar, L., Khan, M., Schmitt, F. (2010). *Guidelines for Mainstreaming Gender into National Biodiversity Strategies and Action Plans*. Gland, Switzerland: IUCN. www.cbd.int/doc/publications/cbd-ts-49-en.pdf



ff to a meeting? © Dan Rothberg

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Note: Some hyperlinks may no longer be active

For more resources, see www.birdlife.org/africa/ci-women-healthy-sustainable-societies-resources

This is the last in the series of articles about 'women and environment' which are posted on www.birdlife.org/africa/project/ci-women-healthy-sustainable-societies. The BirdLife International Africa Partnership Secretariat managed a small grants portfolio of five innovative projects at selected Eastern Afrotropical Important Bird Areas / Key Biodiversity Areas in Uganda and Kenya, on behalf of Conservation International. All projects have now been completed and closed. [Read all stories here](#)