

Women in Conservation: A nine-month journey towards more gender equality in Kenya

- By Obaka Torto and Nelly Wangari



Women participating in a dance with the Deputy Governor of Kiambu County (Photo: KENVO)

“The project we implemented under the [Women in Healthy Sustainable Societies \(WHSS\) programme](#), was a nine-month journey full of excitement,” says Nelly Wangari of Kijabe Environment Volunteers (KENVO) in Kenya. According to Nelly, the project has been an eye opener on how the issue of 'gender' is handled by different organizations dealing with natural resource management of the Kikuyu Escarpment forest, an [Important Bird Area \(IBA\)](#) and [Eastern Afromontane Key Biodiversity Area \(KBA\)](#).

The project went through a number of stages:

Inception

KENVO started the project with a baseline survey among various natural resource user groups (Community Forest Associations – CFAs, Water Resource User Associations – WRUAs) and forest managers, to understand the role of women in environmental conservation at the IBA/KBA. Among many other things, this survey revealed the following two key issues;

- Despite the fact that women are very knowledgeable on utilization of natural resources, especially forest products, women are not involved in policy making on matters of forest conservation - most decisions are made by men. Women in CFAs are mainly involved in tree planting, but when it comes to decision making, they are nowhere to be seen.

- Further, women leadership in community associations is seen as 'tokenism': women are elected in executive positions just to fulfill the country's constitutional requirement of the '1/3 gender rule'. In all six CFAs/WRUAs that were interviewed, women held the position of treasurer – ironically, a position without actual power. As one respondent said: “We are treasurers just by name, the chairman is the custodian of all the group monies, a role that the treasurer should execute.”

Development

KENVO decided to build the capacity of local women, to provide them with the knowledge and skills they needed to be able to make themselves properly heard. Thirty people (25 women and 5 '[men for women](#)') were taken through trainings on group leadership and dynamics; and fifty people (45 women and 5 '[men for women](#)') participated in a financial management and resource mobilization training. In addition, local women were trained in various environment policies like the Kenyan Forest and Water Acts.

Growth

The women became rapidly empowered and pointed out that they were usually involved in *launching* forest management plans, where they are asked to ululate and dance for the plans, but they are never involved in actually *developing* them! KENVO therefore decided to also train the women in Participatory Forest Management (PFM) and ensured that women participated in the development of management plans for the Thogoto and Muguga forests in November 2015.

KENVO, together with GROOTS (Grassroots Organization Operating Together in Sisterhood), also helped strengthening a local women's group dubbed Lari Women for Integrated Development (LAWID). LAWID has been mapping public land and natural resource management in Lari sub-county. The project helped facilitate a platform for the women to interact with policy makers in Kiambu County to present their findings, and trained them in how to speak at meetings, empowering them to stand up, ask questions and make informed comments.



Grassroots women preparing for tree nursery (Photo: KENVO)

As a result of KENVO's project, [women are now participating confidently in different forums that discuss conservation issues](#). "Women are now very vocal as opposed to the past; whenever I call for meetings, they are attending in high numbers and they are raising issues in meetings," Kiambu Alliance CFA chairman Mr. Wambugu pointed out, commenting on the impact of the WHSS project

Delivery

After nine months, in March 2015, the project came to a close with the delivery of the following results:

- Grassroots women who were involved in the project's capacity building activities, have been selected to be members of a local committee on natural resources management headed by the Lari Sub-county Administrator. This committee will be working closely with the County Executive Committee member of Water Environment and Natural Resources in Kiambu County. In addition, some LAWID members have been elected in CFAs leadership, and others are involved in two new committees for projects implemented by KENVO.
- New partnerships have been established between women and key leaders in environment conservation in Kiambu County, such as the director of Water, Environment and Natural resources. LAWID will work with the director in mapping rivers in the county to enhance rehabilitation. The women will also be working with the Lari Sub-county Environment officer to solve the waste disposal menace in the Sub-county.
- The network of 'women in conservation' (including 'men for women') is actively advocating for environmental conservation through the use of fireless cookers, riverine rehabilitation using bamboo seedlings, and on-farm tree planting. They have also set up their own Facebook page to share information and experiences.
- Within KENVO, a new 'gender programme' has been initiated that will help to mainstream gender considerations in its own projects, and to promote a more gender inclusive approach in the conservation of the Kikuyu Escarpment KBA.
- Last but not least, as a direct result of the successful implementation of the WHSS project, KENVO has been approached by the national Government of Kenya to help incorporate gender in processes such as *value chain addition* in agriculture.

This nine-month project was only the beginning – KENVO, like a good parent, will now continue to nurture the concept of gender equality in conservation to full maturity!

Please follow the series of articles about 'women and environment' on www.birdlife.org/africa/project/ci-women-healthy-sustainable-societies. The BirdLife International Africa Partnership Secretariat is managing 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. The grant described in this article was made to the Kijabe Environment Volunteers in Kenya.