

Women in Conservation: Songs for the Forest

- By Obaka Torto and Miriam Westervelt



Figure 1(Photo: Miriam Westervelt)

Do Maasai women participate in decisions affecting the Naimina Enkiyio (Forest of the Lost Girl Child)* in southern Kenya?

This is one of many questions asked in interviews during a study of “Gendered Forest Use, Livelihoods and Decision-making among Loita Maasai in [South Nguruman](#) Key Biodiversity Area (KBA).” The doctoral research project, supported by Conservation International under the [Women in Healthy Sustainable Societies](#) programme, used gender as the lens to analyze decision-making in a communal forest tenure system and to focus on the voices and lived experiences of Maasai women at this [Eastern Afromontane KBA](#).

The women use(d) the resources ...

As primary forest users, Loita Maasai women depend on the Naimina Enkiyio for firewood, water, construction materials, medicines, and ceremonial sites. Over the past 10 years, their forest use has been changing as their pastoralist livelihood shifts toward a more cash-based economy. For example, whereas women made the houses in the past with branches, mud and dung, today they are made by men of oltarakwai (*Juniperus procera*) timber that is now locally threatened.

... but the men (continue to) decide

On the “front stage” forest decision-making has not changed with the times and remains in the hands of the male-dominated Council of Elders. On the “back stage” however, women are discussing forest issues in their own table-banking (income-generating) groups, in local school and church committee meetings. Hot topics of discussion these days are the illegal harvesting of timber and the possibility of subdivision.

Singing for change

Everyone in Loita remembers the powerful songs women sang in the past to encourage leaders to fight for the forest when they faced a legal threat.

“In the past, women sang their songs. What those women were singing about was very painful to hear. Women were not allowed to stand in front of men and talk about the forest then. But when they sang they defeated people and everyone became afraid because they felt the truth had been told.”

Informants said women don’t sing forest protection songs today but there are some who will stand in meetings to voice their views about the forest. The women who stand are perceived as leaders either because they sang songs in the past, they have high wealth status, or they are officials in local committees. These women often express the need to protect the forest for the next generation and to give more forest decision-making power to young people.



This 59 year old widow (with 8 children and 30 grandchildren) says life is easier for men and harder for women today. “She is responsible for the children, cows, shamba, and she goes to do manual work so she can bring food for the children. In fact today women buy clothes for their husband but before it was the man who bought clothes for the wife. I can sell a cow and the husband is not aware because it is so long since he was seen at home.”
(Photo: Miriam Westervelt)



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“The forest is ours and it is our young children who will suffer. So let us rise up and look for what we can do as women so that we can protect our forest.”

“Youth should now be chosen to be in charge of the forest so that if people are coming to destroy the forest and get oltarakwai and olpiripiri timber the youth should know who they are. Youth should be in charge so they can notify the government so action can be taken against those people who are illegally in the forest.”



Men lead community meetings. The one woman on the recently-established Loita forest committee said: “I used to go and sing to political events. Maybe that is what they saw in me and they said let her be on our committee.” (Photo: Miriam Westervelt)

What next?

The study revealed numerous culturally-sensitive opportunities for gender-integrated conservation initiatives such as energy-saving stoves, training youth as forest guards, and tree nurseries owned by women’s table-banking groups.

It appears that Loita women are eager to take their places as agents of change on behalf of Naimina Enkiyio.

**According to Maasai legend, the Loita Forest was given the name Entim e Naimina Enkiyio (Forest of the Lost Girl Child) because of a young girl who was herding calves, followed them into the deep forest, and was never to be seen again. The calves returned home at night without her.*

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 Miriam Westervelt through the British Institute of Eastern Africa (BIEA).