

# Women in Conservation: Can the neck overtake the head?

- By Helen Anthem and Veronicah Lekopole



Samburu Woman (Photo: NRT)

## When women talk to us it is like they are singing

According to one young moran (warrior), speaking during a discussion about women's participation in conservation decision making: "When women talk to us it is like they are singing." As a ranger in a community conservancy, he felt that women have less to contribute to conservation than men.

The discussion was one of a number of activities facilitated by Fauna & Flora International (FFI), involving two local consultants, staff from the [Northern Rangelands Trust \(NRT\)](#) in Kenya, and staff and members from three community conservancies near the Mathews Range [Eastern Afromontane Key Biodiversity Area](#), and the [Shaba National Reserve](#) Important Bird Area in Northern Kenya. The project, funded by Conservation International under the [Women in Healthy Sustainable Societies](#) programme, aimed to encourage action that will support the empowerment of women and their effective participation in conservancy decision making.

Both men and women in pastoralist communities use natural resources to fulfil their daily needs, but women are less able than men to participate in and influence decisions around natural resource management, and indeed other issues that directly affect their lives. Currently, of the numerous leadership roles in the 27 conservancies under the NRT umbrella, only 4 are held by women, and men far outnumber women in decision making fora.

During the project it became clear that [there is a widespread perception that women are not and cannot be good leaders or decision makers](#). Women themselves are reluctant to put themselves forward as leaders. They may lack the confidence and experience, and are expected to respect men, including those younger than themselves, and thus don't like to 'fight' against them by standing in elections.

Participants in the project shared a number of traditional sayings and stories and realised the extent to which these sustain deep rooted myths and stereotypes that justify the roles expected of women and men. Many sayings come from 'the first one', who received a letter from the Creator that is believed to have contained all that was and is essential to be lived and practised by Samburu people. In the communities of these conservancies, cultural identity is clearly very important and it is culture, traditions and the associated views about what women and men can or cannot do that reinforce the myth that women cannot lead, that they are merely singing when they talk.

Culture is one of the most oft-cited reasons amongst conservationists for not addressing gender; *"It is not our place to challenge or change local culture."* However many conservation interventions seek to do just that, providing support to encourage people to adapt often fundamental aspects of their way of life in ways that are deemed more compatible to achieving conservation goals. Culture is not set in time, but is dynamic and constantly evolving under the influence of many factors, both external and internal.

## Forces for change

Often there are forces for change within communities themselves, such as the participants of this project. A number of male participants stated that change needs to start in their own homes, and committed to reducing the heavy work burden of their female family members. Some conservancy staff and members reflected on their own performance and identified opportunities for change within their own work. There was also recognition of the need to involve women to achieve conservation goals. Indeed, according to one man: *"Women could be the missing link in....conservation."*

**Traditional sayings reinforce the perception that women do not make good leaders**

*"A woman cannot stand in a gathering of men."*

*"You cannot follow up the idea of a woman."*

*"Women remain like children and are not able to foresee what their actions may cost."*

**Ketejo apa le kwe (the first one said)**

*Women are like the stick of a spear. It can be easily replaced whenever it is broken.*

*A woman only knows how to cut off her own throat.*

*A woman is a neck, a man is the head and the neck cannot overtake the head.*

Previously published on the BirdLife International website on 14 May 2015

Note: Some hyperlinks may no longer be active

Just a few years ago it would have been unthinkable for a woman to have a leadership role in these communities, but in recent years 2 women have been elected to lead community conservancies. There is hope that, with time, women will be empowered to participate effectively in conservation decision making and that the 'songs' of women will be more widely valued.



*A community conservancy meeting (Photo: NRT)*

*Please follow the series of articles about 'women and environment' on [www.birdlife.org/africa/project/ci-women-healthy-sustainable-societies](http://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 Fauna & Flora International (FFI).*