

GIRRRRL POWER!

- By Obaka Torto



The Africa Regional Director Julius Arinaitwe supports women empowerment during a monitoring visit to one of the CI-funded projects in Uganda (Image: BirdLife)

We need more women in conservation!

“Women do a lot of things and they do it perfectly. However when it comes to conservation, they are supposed to be behind. Why?”

This question was not asked by a woman, but by a man called George Gathu. George is one of the staunch, male supporters of the new Lari Women for Integrated Development (LAWID) grassroot women’s group at the Kikuyu Escarpment IBA in Kenya. "If we educate our women, and we put our houses and children in their care, why wouldn't they be able to lead elsewhere?"

George's question came back various times during a two-day experience exchange meeting in February 2015 in Nairobi, which brought together the leaders of five small conservation projects in Kenya and Uganda. These projects, funded by Conservation International (CI) under its *Women in Healthy Sustainable Societies* programme, aim to provide a better understanding of the gender dimensions of conservation, and support women’s involvement in environmental decision-making.

“We were like cows on a tether”

As part of the CI-funded project, the women of LAWID were trained by KENVO (a BirdLife Site Support Group) and a local organisation called GROOTS. They learned about local resource use mapping, the application of locally relevant laws and regulations, and organisational management. As a result, they have produced physical maps of their environment, and are already advising the local authorities about issues such as tree planting, waste disposal, and how to make local natural resource management more gender-sensitive.



George Gathu speaking during the exchange meeting at KENVO's resource centre at the Kikuyu Escarpment (Image: Nelly Wangari, KENVO)

One of the LAWID members, Anne Gacambi, put it like this: “We used to be in the village, walking around like cows on a tether. We were not empowered. But now our minds are open and we became strong!” The group already has more than 45 members and has started a range of environmentally-friendly income-generating activities such as fruit tree nurseries, briquette making out of rubbish, and the production of fireless cookers.

Should men be scared?

The meeting participants, in an attempt to answer George’s question, came up with a long list of barriers that prevent the effective involvement of women in conservation. These ranged from practical (“even if women are invited to meetings, they have no transport to get to them”) via socio-economic (“women don’t own the land, so why should they be involved in how we want to use it?”) to cultural and traditional barriers (“women are like children, they can’t make decisions”).



Meeting participants visiting the tree nursery project of one of the LAWID members (Image: Nelly Wangari, KENVO)

They also identified solutions to remove these barriers, and already piloted some of these ideas through the five projects that were funded by Conservation International. However – no fear! – all participants agreed that whatever we do, we should not cut out the men. As Nelly Wangari from KENVO said: “It is obvious we have to work with both men and women – you can’t walk on one leg!”

Equitable conservation

Kame Westerman, CI's Gender Advisor, said: "Watching the evolution of these five projects over the last nine months, and learning from their work and the enthusiastic people leading them, has been inspiring. These are great examples of how small, dedicated funding can help us to better understand how to promote more equitable conservation for both men and women."



Group picture of the meeting participants at KENVO's resource centre at the Kikuyu Escarpment (Image: Nelly Wangari, KENVO)

Kame also took the opportunity of her visit to Kenya to provide a gender awareness training to the BirdLife Africa Partnership Secretariat staff – which, it has to be said, didn't come a day too soon....

Do you want to know more? (you should!)

Please follow the series of articles that will be produced about the five 'women and environment' projects in the next few weeks on www.birdlife.org/africa/project/ci-women-healthy-sustainable-societies. They will explain once and for all why involving women in conservation is more than just common sense – it is actually pretty smart!

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.