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## Environmental challenges facing women in Kenya

- ▶ The cost of undervaluing the contribution of females to environmental conservation and alienating them from decision-making is that many interventions are gender-blind
- ▶ The direct involvement of women with nature also means that they are disproportionately affected by the destruction of the environment. When droughts are prolonged, they have to walk longer and risk their safety to fetch water.

### LANCER WAO

**W**omen are the agents of the change we need in the environment. The restoration of the ecosystem to protect nature and livelihoods cannot be achieved without them being part and parcel of the process.

According to the 2019 Census in Kenya, there are at least 24 million women in the country. This is slightly more than half of the total population. By default, given the various gender

roles and cultural norms, they are often involved in activities that directly relate to nature.

By and large, women engage in environmental conservation through forest activities, small-scale farming, management of water resources, and keeping the environment clean.

According to the World Bank, at least 80 per cent of farmers in Kenya are women. Moreover, at least 76 per cent of the women in Kenya rely on agriculture for income.

They are primarily responsible for fetching water for household use, getting herbs for medicinal purposes in their roles as the primary caregivers to their families—especially in rural areas and fetching wood for fuel to prepare meals and keep homes warm.

They also maintain the cleanliness of their home environments through ensuring regular disposal of waste.

Unfortunately, in most cases, their involvement ends at this point—in making policies and providing leadership, it is either done based on merely meeting the constitutional requirement of the one third gender rule or not being involved at all.

The direct involvement of women with nature also means that they are disproportionately affected by the



Women carry firewood to the Abbu Shouk refugee camp. [Courtesy]

destruction of the environment. When droughts are prolonged, they have to walk longer and risk their safety to fetch water.

Further, when rainfalls are too heavy, they have to bear the pain of being displaced and their families contracting communicable diseases, besides, they are constantly involved in conflicts arising from the competition of using water resources because their need water even if it means risking their safety.

Despite being at risk of these and more, they are sadly excluded in decision-making, management and use of environmental resources.

The cost of undervaluing the contribution of females to environmental conservation and alienating them from decision-making is that many interventions are gender-blind. They do not incorporate the unique challenges women face in conservation in design and implementation.

Simply put, because they are not designed within the gender lens, they do not lead to outcomes that benefit women. In the end, after time and resources have been injected, there is little to brag about their success.

One of the approaches that can be used to engage more women on environmental issues is eco-feminism. The theory holds that there is a great connection between the suppression of women in society and the destruction of the environment.

Thus, protecting the environment directly relates to protecting them. The strength of this approach is that it moves from placing the power of decision-making on one gender and makes it an inclusive activity hence increasing the likelihood of success in the long term.

Globally, the realisation that women

are crucial to sustainable development through environment conservation is slowly taking root in policies and practice.

In countries like India and Nepal, research on the gender composition of forests and management of forests and their impact on resource governance and conservation outcomes conducted in 2016, showed that the involvement of women led to better outcomes in forest management interventions.

Similarly, in Rwanda where various land-tenure have been introduced, a study established that female-headed households had increased investment in soil conservation efforts.

Stakeholders need to prioritise channelling more resources in educating women about the value chain of conservation for both current and future generations. It will help them understand

that they are valuable to the survival of the human simply by the way they interact with nature.

Secondly, it is important to intentionally involve women in formulating and reviewing policies related to the environment.

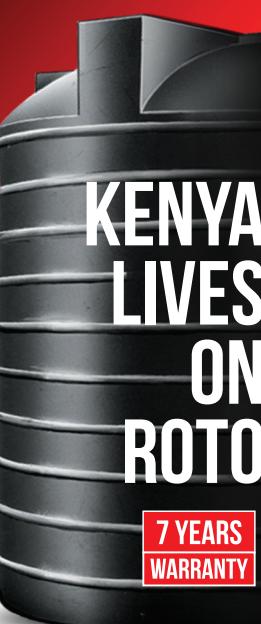
Furthermore, the leadership of women in the environmental sector should not be just a mere activity of fulfilling the constitutional requirement, rather, it should be on the compelling belief that they are capable of offering solutions to the environmental issues in Kenya.

On 2021 World Environmental Day, let us more specifically celebrate the involvement of women in the restoration of the ecosystem and commit to doing better.

**The writer is a Communications and Knowledge Management Consultant**

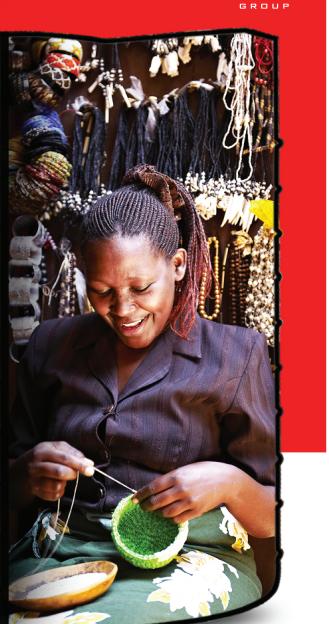


Nitsuh Tsehay, 43, waits for her turn at the hand-dug well in Gorad village [Courtesy]



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