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INCREASING WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN COMMUNITY NATURAL RESOURCE GOVERNANCE IN ZAMBIA

Wildlife conservation and natural resource management are critical areas for economic development in Zambia, yet women still have limited opportunities for participation in community-level governance. In October 2020, the United States Agency for International Development-funded Integrated Land and Resource Governance (ILRG) program led a pilot initiative to empower women during the elections for community resources board (CRB) positions in four chiefdoms (Mukungule, Nabwalya, Chikwa, and Chifunda) around North Luangwa National Park, in partnership with the Department of National Parks and Wildlife (DNPW), Frankfurt Zoological Society (FZS), and the Zambia Community Resources Board Association (ZCRBA). The objective was to increase the number of women participating in CRB elections, with the ultimate goal of drawing lessons learned and best practices to promote greater gender equality in policies and programs related to community natural resource governance in Zambia. This brief summarizes the strategies used to empower women, the results, and the challenges and opportunities for scaling up gender-responsive approaches to community resource governance.

Community Resources Boards

Established in 2002, CRBs are community platforms for representation, control, and decision making on natural resources, and related revenue. CRBs are formed from the lower level structure of village action groups (VAGs), which comprise up to ten elected members of the zoned villages and are responsible for deciding and implementing community needs and interests in the utilization of wildlife resources. The 10 highest voted members from all VAGs in a chiefdom are grouped to form the CRB, which is a higher-level executive body. Elections are held every three years and there is no limitation on the number of consecutive terms an individual can serve.

BACKGROUND

BARRIERS AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION

Research shows that women and men have distinct social roles and responsibilities both at community and household levels regarding their access to and control of natural resources. Men and women have unique knowledge about natural resources and they use resources differently. Women frequently do not equally share in the economic benefits derived from natural resources, and resource depletion often impacts them disproportionately. Women face several barriers to participation in natural resource governance. Rules that govern community resource groups often explicitly or implicitly exclude women's meaningful participation. Social and cultural norms that associate public engagement with men also discourage women's participation. Women have competing priorities due to their disproportionate responsibilities for unpaid care work, such as child care, household tasks, and elder care. Finally, lack of support from spouses and extended family, as well as women's lack of information and confidence, are also deterrent factors.

Evidence from several countries shows that inclusion of women in natural resource governance has significant positive effects on conservation and development outcomes. A comparative study in East Africa and Latin America found the presence of women in community forest governance structures to enhance responsible behavior and forest sustainability (Mwangi et al., 2011). In Asia, increasing women's representation in community forest governance institutions improved resource conservation and forest regeneration (Agarwal, 2009). The benefits of women's participation were linked to their indigenous knowledge of the forest, preference for collaborative relationships, and greater compliance and adoption of sustainable practices. Increased participation in natural resource governance can be a pathway for wider empowerment of women in the household and in the public sphere, also leading to opportunities for growth in families' income from economic activities related to natural resources. In addition, private companies in value chains related to natural resources are more likely to certify products and practices if women have active participation in resource governance (Beaujon Marin & Kuriakose, 2017).

WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN COMMUNITY RESOURCE GOVERNANCE IN ZAMBIA

Women's participation in community resource governance in Zambia remains significantly low. The legal and policy framework, including the 2015 Wildlife Act No. 14 and the 2018 National Parks and Wildlife Policy, promotes devolution approaches and community involvement in the management and conservation of natural resources. It also supports gender equality and social inclusion in wildlife conservation, so that women, men, and youth have equal opportunities and benefit equally, with the goal of reducing inequities in conservation. However, progress in policies have not been reflected in community governance in the sector. Programs and strategies have failed to adopt gender-responsive approaches and consider the unique concerns, needs, and knowledge of women and men.

CRBs are an important structure for devolved power to communities in the management of wildlife with Zambia's chiefdoms and are an important entry point for participation in wildlife and natural resource management. Gender equality remains extremely low and the 77 CRBs across the country have less than 10 percent women representation; only 3 percent of CRBs have ever had a woman in a leadership position. The few women that participate in CRBs experienced challenges in asserting themselves within these male-dominated structures. Although the legal and policy framework calls for gender equality in community governance structures, the actual lack of women's representation and decision-making power is often ignored, undermining the ideals of community participation and the effectiveness of conservation efforts.

GENDER INTEGRATION IN CRB ELECTIONS

Based on recommendations from an earlier gender assessment of the wildlife sector in Zambia (Malasha & Duncan, 2020), ILRG and local partners implemented a range of interventions before, during, and after CRB elections within four chiefdoms to mitigate gendered barriers and to increase the opportunities for women to equally and fully participate in the election process. USAID brought together key stakeholders to develop a shared workplan and partnered with community-based community liaison assistants (CLAs) and gender equality champions to deliver day-to-day community outreach activities.

The main barriers identified in the assessment result from harmful gender norms. Therefore the pilot: 1) targeted male traditional leaders to promote positive norms change; 2) sensitized communities; and 3) engaged with family members (men and women) to increase acceptance of women's participation and leadership. A total of 150 women across the four chiefdoms were mobilized and offered training to equip them with skills to go through the election process and potentially take on community leadership roles. The skills training focused on providing aspiring women candidates with real-time knowledge and technical and foundational skills such as self-confidence, public speaking, campaign tactics, and networking. Negotiation skills were part of the training so that women could advocate for the support of their spouses and their family members.



An aspiring candidate practices campaigning during the skills training in Mwansabamba VAG in Mukungule

BUPE BANDA/ZCRBA

During the election, aspiring candidates were given the necessary information and guidance to effectively file their nominations and received important resources such as photocopying for campaign materials, hired bicycles for transport, and drums for mobilizing community members. ILRG facilitated communication between the women candidates so that they had the support of their peers and were able to share costs. For instance, in more remote villages, women travelled together to campaign for security reasons and worked with each other to distribute their campaign materials. Due to limited resources, most of the women preferred door-to-door campaigning, unlike men, who mostly held group meetings that had associated costs such as providing food and drinks.

After the election, newly elected CRB members, men and women, underwent a two-day orientation about the nature and requirements of their role. The orientation included a gender sensitization module, which was supported by USAID and included the spouses of elected women to reinforce support. This sensitization provided elected CRB members with an understanding of gender-responsive approaches to conducting CRB business and how to promote women's meaningful participation and leadership. In addition, a plan was devised to offer continued support for CRB women members in leadership skills development.

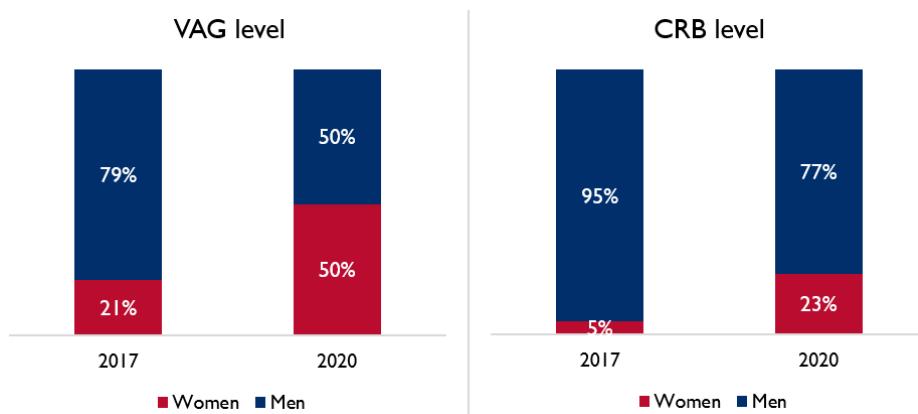
RESULTS

In the four chiefdoms, 287 people were nominated in the elections, out of which 150 were women (52 percent). A total of 252 people were elected to the VAGs, including 125 women (50 percent). Although a considerable proportion of those elected at the VAG level were women, they struggled to be among those who received the highest number of votes and secure a place in the CRB. However, the results

were impressive comparing results from 2017 with the 2020 elections. At the VAG level, overall women's representation increased from 21 percent in the 2017 elections to 50 percent in 2020. At the CRB level, in 2017 out of the 40 positions in all four chiefdoms, only two were occupied by women, whereas in 2020 nine out of 40 were occupied by women, which represents an overall increase in women's representation from five percent to 23 percent.

Women's lower representation among candidates with the highest total vote also influenced their ability to attain leadership positions within CRBs (chairperson and vice-chairperson/secretary), which are assigned automatically to the candidates with the most votes. Although the number of women holding leadership

GENDER REPRESENTATION AT VAG AND CRB LEVELS ACROSS THE FOUR CHIEFDOMS, 2017 AND 2020



positions at the CRB level increased compared to previous years, men still dominate the leadership and overall composition of the CRBs, with a total of six women compared to 18 men holding the top executive committee positions. The sex-disaggregated results also showed some noteworthy differences in gender equality when looking across the four chiefdoms, where women now make up between 34 to 62 percent of the VAGs. This reflects differences in the culture and tradition around gender across the chiefdoms and the extent to which communities held on to harmful gender norms that limit women's leadership opportunities.

LESSONS LEARNED

The intervention and results detailed above revealed important lessons related to the main challenges and opportunities for scaling the approach and for future interventions by DNPW, local governing bodies, ZCRBA, FZS, other civil society organizations, and other donors.

BUILDING ACCEPTANCE AMONG LEADERS AND COMMUNITIES

Increasing the involvement of women in community governance requires deliberate effort. Restrictive gender norms that hinder woman's participation and leadership in decision-making are strong, although the depth of resistance varies across communities and between women and men. It is crucial to sensitize communities and engage traditional leaders (who most of the time are men) to influence positive shifts on the acceptance of women as leaders. Messages on gender equality were often already present in communities but had not yet been connected to natural resource management and community governance. Targeted messages focused on the inclusion of women in the elections and in CRB leadership helped women, communities, and other key stakeholders to visualize and understand the concrete actions required to increase women's participation, and why it was important.

The strategy to target groups of potential women candidates for gender sensitization and support was effective, but greater engagement of men is needed, since they have a crucial role in accepting and promoting women taking on new roles both at the household and at the community level. While traditional leadership played an important role in driving gender equality messages and broader change

to accept women's leadership, organic and community-driven selection of women leaders increased legitimacy and helped to avoid perceptions that leaders were hand-selecting preferred female candidates.

IDENTIFY AND SUPPORT WOMEN CANDIDATES AND REMOVE BARRIERS TO THEIR PARTICIPATION

The playing field is not level; women were disadvantaged by a number of factors and needed support to go through the election process. Women lacked basic information about natural resource governance, CRBs, and the election process, as well as about how to nominate themselves and run successful campaigns. This lack of information prevented women who were interested in participating from doing so and also affected the effectiveness of their campaigns, in terms of voter outreach and other crucial campaign tactics.

Power dynamics in communities, the short campaign period (two to three days), and high poverty levels encouraged practices of buying votes or exchanging votes for benefits (money, food, drinks, etc.). These practices advantaged men because they have access to financial and social resources. They also have the potential to encourage corruption in the CRB, since candidates who spend considerable resources during the campaign might feel encouraged to recover such expenses when in office. However, because men are commonly associated with corrupt practices, this offered an opportunity for women to present themselves as a less corrupt alternative, which worked well in some chiefdoms.

Encouraged by the lack of term limits to serve on the CRB, men who have held positions for a long time started their campaigns long before other potential candidates and were more aware of the election process. They also often practiced intimidatory practices to prevent the election of new members. Male candidates frequently belittled female candidates and made disparaging remarks about their capabilities, affecting women's confidence. Even after the elections, candidates who lost were publicly mocked by the supporters of winners, which can impact women's willingness to run in the future and increase their vulnerability to violence and harassment. Campaign malpractice was not monitored and was largely accepted as normal among voters.

Women that got a high number of votes were helped mostly by family. Women who came from larger and more influential families received more support and increased chances of winning. Candidates without such connections did not get support, regardless of individual qualities.

The experience revealed that women needed support to become leaders before and beyond the elections if they are to play an effective role. When women perform roles outside the home, there is increased potential for misunderstandings and increased risk of intimate partner violence at home, which then becomes a barrier to effective participation. The engagement with women's spouses before, during, and after elections had a positive impact. It increased their understanding of the demands related to holding a position in community governance and enhanced acceptance of women leadership among male CRB members.

The 2013 Election Guidelines are considered "gender neutral," failing to acknowledge and address barriers faced by women. In the context of strong socio-cultural and practical obstacles to women's participation in community leadership, deliberate gender-responsive action is necessary. Affirmative action such as 50/50 quotas (implemented in Chikwa Chiefdom) can be an effective strategy to increase women's participation, but needs to be accompanied by broader intervention. Other issues such as lack of clarity in the application of minimum educational requirements for candidates, guidance on secret ballots, monitoring of malpractices, automatic appointment of candidates with highest votes to leadership positions, and GBV risks are currently not addressed with gender inequality in mind.

DELIVERING COST- AND TIME-EFFECTIVE GENDER-RESPONSIVE APPROACHES

A cultivated relationship of trust between facilitators from partner organizations and communities enabled successful implementation of activities within a short period of time. The existing community development capacity and understanding of natural resource management among CLAs proved crucial for success. Their knowledge and close relationship with communities allowed the identification of existing barriers, gaps, opportunities, and entry points. They were also well-positioned to deliver messages on gender equality and women's empowerment to the communities, who saw them as trusted members of their communities and not outsiders.

In that sense, recognizing and utilizing existing capacities within the community enabled rapid delivery of activities (in about five weeks from conception to delivery), minimized the cost for gender integration, and increased potential for successful results and sustainability. Rather than financial support to women, the focus was on gaining the backing of traditional authorities to push for changes in gender norms and promote acceptance of women in natural resource governance. These activities were implemented by community-based staff, which minimized costs. However, engagement with the government and other stakeholders for broader uptake and continued support for elected women will require additional financial resources and technical support.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Increased participation and representation of women in community governance in the wildlife sector is important. Women are interested in these roles and barriers can be overcome when there are gender-informed shifts in policies and practices. “Gender neutral” policies and approaches fail to address the underlying and systematic barriers that continue to limit women’s equal participation in community governance, particularly in rural areas. In the context of strong socio-cultural and practical obstacles to women’s participation in community leadership, deliberate gender-responsive action is necessary.

The 2013 Election Guidelines should be reviewed to tackle the barriers that hinder equality and participation of women and other marginalized groups. At the community level, key priorities should include strong engagement of traditional leaders and men to dialogue on socio-cultural beliefs and social norms around women’s leadership. Finally, continued support for women is needed through sharing information and training on technical and foundational skills to develop their capacity and confidence to take up and exercise leadership roles. USAID has developed a full report as well as practice notes to support the effective roll-out of this work with government, communities and implementing partners.

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SUGGESTED CITATION

Malasha, P. (2020). *Increasing women's participation in community natural resource governance in Zambia*. Washington, DC: USAID Integrated Land and Resource Governance Task Order under the Strengthening Tenure and Resource Rights II (STARR II) IDIQ.

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For information, please contact:

COR: Sarah Lowery, USAID Land and Resource Governance Team/DDI (slowery@usaid.gov)

Chief of Party: Matt Sommerville, Tetra Tech (Matt.Sommerville@tetratech.com)