

Unpacking the perceived benefits and costs of integrating gender into conservation projects: voices of conservation field practitioners

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Abstract Many in the conservation sphere have noted that robust and gender-equitable stakeholder engagement is crucial in achieving conservation outcomes, ensuring project sustainability and supporting human well-being. However, despite policies, international agreements and increasing requirements of donors, gender is still often viewed as an add-on rather than as a fundamental element of effective conservation. In an effort to overcome this, Conservation International has invested in nearly 20 project sites since 2014 to support targeted gender integration into existing conservation projects. We conducted a survey with practitioners across these sites to examine the barriers to and enablers of gender integration, and practitioners' perceptions of the benefits and challenges involved in this. Our findings demonstrate the importance of both external drivers (funding requirements) and a supportive environment (capacity building, technical and financial support) in incentivising a focus on gender. Respondents also reported a suite of benefits (e.g. increased participation, higher quality of the project) and costs (mainly financial) related to gender integration. In documenting these efforts to build gender-related capacity, and the associated benefits and challenges, we highlight the importance of gender-responsive conservation initiatives, and evaluate a method of achieving this. As conservation practitioners may be more inclined to listen to each other (given their shared objectives) rather than to gender specialists, this research can help to shift practitioner dialogue and conservation practice to be more open and responsive to gender.

Keywords Community-based conservation, gender integration, gender-equitable stakeholder engagement, gender-responsive, natural resource management, perceived benefits

Introduction

The recent global assessment published by the Intergovernmental Science–Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES; Brondizio et al., 2019) warns

of the ongoing rapid decline in nature, and the recent annual report of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) shows no slowdown in global emissions (UNFCCC, 2019). Effective and sustainable conservation of the Earth's remaining ecosystems, and the services they provide to people, are thus critical. Evidence is growing that robust and gender-equitable stakeholder engagement is crucial in achieving conservation outcomes, ensuring project sustainability and supporting human well-being (e.g. Westermann et al., 2005; Leisher et al., 2016; Kristjanson et al., 2017; Agarwal, 2018). Based on this evidence, and as a result of decades of rights-based advocacy, the Rio conventions, which set global environmental policy, have come to adopt gender-responsive language and actions (CBD et al., 2012). Here, gender responsive refers to going beyond mere identification of gender issues to include proactive efforts that aim to overcome gaps and inequalities; this differs from gender sensitive, which acknowledges gender gaps but does not necessarily include measures to reduce or eliminate them. The UNFCCC Gender Action Plan (UNFCCC, 2017) was adopted in November 2017 to support the implementation of gender-related decisions and mandates in the UNFCCC process. It seeks to advance women's full, equal and meaningful participation and promote gender-responsive climate policy and the mainstreaming of a gender perspective in the implementation of the Convention and the work of Parties, the Secretariat, United Nations entities and all stakeholders at all levels. Likewise, the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity adopted a Gender Plan of Action in 2014 (CBD, 2014) that includes actions for Parties to undertake in implementing the Convention, as well as a framework of actions for the Secretariat to integrate gender into its work. In addition, in 2017 the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) adopted its first Gender Action Plan (UNCCD, 2017) that supports and enhances the implementation of the gender-related decisions and mandates adopted in the UNCCD process.

These commitments to gender-responsiveness are also translated into the major finance mechanisms of the conventions: for example, the Global Environment Facility's policy on gender equality (2018), the Green Climate Fund's updated gender policy and action plan (2018), and the Adaptation Fund's gender policy and action plan (2016) all lay out specific requirements related to analyses, indicators and staffing to encourage project implementers

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towards gender-responsiveness, and gender is tracked at a portfolio level. Gender also features prominently in other public funding entities such as the World Bank and bilateral country donors (e.g. United States Agency for International Development (USAID), Australian Aid, UK Aid Direct), and within many foundations that support conservation initiatives.

Over the last decade there has been a shift in the way in which gender is considered within international conservation, including amongst the five largest conservation organizations: Conservation International, WWF, The Nature Conservancy, IUCN and the Wildlife Conservation Society (KW, pers. comm., 2020). Although many local conservation organizations (such as Wangari Maathai's Greenbelt Movement) were built on the premise of women as conservation stewards, the international conservation movement has been slower to adopt a truly gender-responsive approach. With the exception of IUCN, many of these organizations have invested to only a minor degree in this area, and only within the last decade or less (KW, pers. comm., 2020).

At Conservation International, the process of integrating gender began with the establishment of the Conservation Initiative on Human Rights, a consortium of international conservation NGOs that seeks to improve the practice of conservation by promoting the integration of human rights in conservation policy and practice. The Initiative's principles on human rights were translated into organizational policies in 2012. At Conservation International this included a policy that calls for integration of gender into the project cycle. Shortly after the policy was designed, Conservation International launched a gender programme with dedicated funding to advance the policy's aims.

Although gender has been integrated into international environmental agreements, environmental finance, and within large environmental organizations themselves through institutional policies, conservation practitioners too often continue to view it as an add-on donor requirement rather than a fundamental element of effective conservation. Spending funding and time on gender activities is often seen as diverting money and time away from conservation activities. This is also noted amongst international development institutions, where, despite gender mainstreaming policies 'it is at the level of implementation that significant challenges remain' (Moser & Moser, 2010, p. 15).

In a call for better integration of social science into conservation, Bennett et al. (2016) describe four barriers that apply to social science integration more broadly, but also to gender integration specifically: (1) ideology (conservation is viewed as an ecological rather than social process), (2) institutional priorities (e.g. area of forest conserved is prioritized over reducing gender gaps in natural resource management), (3) knowledge gaps (interdisciplinary training of conservation students does not adequately focus

on technical gender methods) and (4) lack of capacity (gender is often inadequately financed or staffed in conservation projects). To achieve effective gender-responsive conservation initiatives, it is important to understand how these barriers manifest in the context of conservation institutions, and to identify practical methods to reduce and overcome them. With a global presence and a diverse set of field-based conservation projects, Conservation International provides a suitable case study.

Since 2014 Conservation International's gender programme has supported 15 field offices through 19 grants. Grants provided USD 2,250–13,000 (mean USD 9,600) and ran for 3–9 months (mean 6.6 months). Funding was distributed via a request-for-proposal system, with applicants submitting a 2-page proposal outlining a conservation project within which they would apply Conservation International's gender guidelines, or explore or apply gender research. The grants had three purposes: (1) to test Conservation International's gender guidelines, a tool designed specifically for conservation practitioners to identify and respond to gender-related aspects of field-based conservation initiatives, (2) to familiarize staff with gender concepts and strategies, helping to overcome the common assumption that only gender specialists can carry out these tasks, and (3) to create examples of gender-responsive conservation projects. In this case, gender-responsive projects refer to conservation or development projects that have undertaken some sort of gender analysis to understand the roles and responsibilities of diverse women and men with respect to the project's objectives, identified how women and men may benefit from, or be harmed by, the project's activities, and have begun to implement measures to reduce or mitigate potential harm and proactively introduce activities to ensure that benefits are shared equitably.

The 19 projects fell within three broad categories: (1) conducting focus groups and interviews to examine the gender dynamics, roles and norms in existing conservation initiatives (Colombia, Ecuador, Guyana, Madagascar, Papua New Guinea, Timor-Leste, Solomon Islands, Samoa, Philippines), (2) systematic mainstreaming of gender into overall programmatic work such as programme gender strategies (Peru, Bolivia, Cambodia, Timor-Leste), and (3) building staff and partner capacity through training (Liberia, Indonesia). The Philippines project has been detailed in Tabangay & Westerman (2016). Here, we capture the results of these projects from the perspective of the conservation practitioners.

Study area

Projects sites were located in Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Guyana, Ecuador-Galapagos, Suriname, Madagascar,

Liberia, Timor-Leste, Cambodia, Philippines, Papua New Guinea, Indonesia, Solomon Islands and Samoa.

Methods

In 2016 Conservation International conducted an initial review of the gender-focused grants using a survey and key informant interviews, to identify project outcomes and understand the perceived costs and benefits that arise from integrating gender consideration into conservation initiatives. Seven grants were used in 2014, six in 2015, and six in 2016, and there was some diversity in the results and outcomes. Across all projects, funding was primarily used for staff time and costs associated with gathering and sharing information (focus groups, interviews, roundtables, workshops).

We collected information through analysis of project reports, an e-mail survey of 12 conservation practitioners (eight women, four men) who had been managers of the small grants, and nine structured interviews with the project managers (six women, three men). The total number of participants was 15; six were involved in both the e-mail survey and interviews. Interviews were conducted in English or Spanish, based on the individual's preference, and lasted c. 1 hour.

In the survey, respondents rated their level of skills and knowledge related to gender before and after the project supported by the grant, and provided details of any changes (positive and/or negative) in the project resulting from the increased focus on gender. They also identified barriers and challenges they faced, conditions that helped or hindered the project's success, and any broader impacts observed. The interviews were designed to gather additional insights on the costs and benefits of integrating gender into conservation initiatives.

The interviewer took detailed notes during each interview and collated written survey responses. Using deductive analysis based on pre-identified themes, data were mapped to primary themes (drivers, perceived benefits, perceived challenges) and specific subthemes for benefits (impact on women's participation, impact on project success, changes in operations, and improved ability to access/respond to donors) and challenges (inadequate funding/time, inadequate capacity/skills, and entrenched social norms). Where information arose that did not fit the pre-determined categories, new categories were designed (strengthened partnerships and normative change at the community level). Exemplary quotes were identified to illustrate each subtheme.

Results

Respondents indicated that the three most common drivers for gender integration in projects were (1) funding

requirements from donors (4/15 respondents), (2) staff awareness about the importance of gender as a result of internal and/or external training (7/15 respondents) and (3) the availability of funds to support gender integration (the grants provided by Conservation International's gender programme; 8/15 respondents).

Interviewees reported a number of benefits of taking a gender-responsive approach, which could be grouped into six main categories:

(1) Increased participation and empowerment of women in conservation activities and decision-making One of the most significant benefits, as noted by all interviewees, was increased participation of women in conservation initiatives and decision-making processes, although quantitative data on this were not available. Through the use of strategies such as specific capacity building workshops, income generation initiatives and group collaboration, there was a noticeable increase in the number of women participating in, and being empowered by, conservation initiatives. At one site, staff reported that 'the research [on gender] has guided our continued engagement with the fishing communities and how to work to better empower women in this area'. At another, a respondent noted that 'because of the project, more women are in the fisheries association'.

(2) Contribution to potential conservation outcomes Approximately half of the respondents (8/15) reported that overall project quality increased as they adopted a more holistic approach that considered the needs and roles of both women and men. Through actively engaging both men and women and promoting equitable access to information, many reported an increased interest and participation in conservation initiatives by community members overall. Although when these data were collected it was too early to observe any concrete conservation outcomes, it is likely that the better designed projects, along with increased community buy-in, could lead to tangible conservation success. As one respondent said, 'in the long term we expect to increase the efficacy of our projects as a consequence of taking a gendered approach'.

(3) Increased staff awareness and changes to operations In half (8/15) of the field programmes, the opportunity to reflect on their current work from a gender perspective led to changes in staffing and community engagement. As the manager of one field programme reported, '[because of this project] we have changed the way we engage field staff. Previously all the staff were male and based out of [the capital city]. Now we engage community-based field staff from each community we work in. Our aim is to

have one male and one female [field staff] in each community permanently'. Elsewhere it was noted that these small grants 'allowed us, for the first time, to sit down as an office and focus on gender as an issue [...] and was definitely an effective way to build staff capacity and understanding about gender'.

(4) Gender normative change within project communities

Eight of the 11 individuals interviewed specifically mentioned a noticeable change in perspective regarding gender within the communities where the projects were implemented. With a more explicit focus on gender, project discussions and activities with community members helped to elevate understanding about the gendered roles and responsibilities within natural resource management. In some cases, this has led to transformational change within the community: in one instance, staff highlighted that 'in part because of separate discussions we held with men and women about fisheries, one woman has become president of her community', and staff from another site reported 'we have seen positive changes in the community as a result of the grant; in fact it has been one of the most exciting innovations of the project in the past year. The women's financial contribution to the community fisheries committees has meant that they 'now feel more entitled to know what management decisions are being made, and to challenge their decisions as they need to, thus ensuring women's voices are heard and their needs considered in decision-making'.

(5) *Strengthened partnerships for national implementation of environmental priorities* All interviewees noted that partnerships were crucial in supporting gender integration, including those formed internally amongst staff members, those with other conservation agencies or social development organizations, and with various levels of governmental agencies. Several grants were used by country offices to facilitate gender roundtable discussions, bringing together representatives from conservation and development organizations, government entities and academia to share lessons and information. Partnerships, particularly with the government, are crucial for sustainability and scalability of conservation projects. Across multiple countries, interviewees noted that their research and insights on gender in the conservation context was greatly appreciated by partners such as the Ministries of Environment, United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women and USAID. As one respondent noted 'partners [now] invite me [to meetings] as a local resource person on gender [...] and I have influenced our partners about collecting sex-disaggregated data, particularly the gender focal people of the Department of Environment and Natural Resources', and another reported that '[because of this project] I worked

with the government's Ministry of Natural Resources to develop the gender component of a report for a climate change resilience project (their staff had no idea how to approach it)'.

(6) *Increased ability to access and steward funding with gender requirements* One-third (5/15) of the respondents noted the benefit of the small grants in increasing staff competency in gender integration. They also noted that teams with expertise and skills related to gender issues can be more competitive in accessing funds from a wider array of sources, and can successfully steward funds that have stringent gender requirements (such as those noted above). To illustrate this point, one country office reported that '[because of this gender project and research] we were ready to take on a new USAID project, which has a strong gender dimension'. Several others mentioned the grants as crucial to building staff capacity before getting Global Environment Facility (GEF) or Green Climate Fund-financed projects: '[the grant] allowed us to work with partners to produce the foundation of a gender mainstreaming plan for a GEF-funded project'.

The reported perceived costs of or challenges associated with gender integration fell into four main categories:

(1) *Insufficient funding for staff time and activities* All respondents pointed to staffing as one of the main barriers to effective gender integration. Conducting a gender analysis and adapting strategies and activities to address gender inequalities takes time and financial resources, sometimes requiring dedicated staff. Budgets for conservation projects are often limited, with insufficient (if any) additional funds available for staff time and activities associated with ensuring gender-responsiveness. Because of this, gender issues are often an added responsibility for practitioners with an already full workload. Despite good intentions, gender considerations are thus easily dismissed or de-prioritized. As one respondent explained: 'I try to incorporate additional outreach to women into proposal budgets (for traveling and workshops) but then budgets get cut and this is one of the first things to go'.

(2) *Inadequate knowledge and skills of key project personnel* Many conservation practitioners are trained in natural sciences and do not have sufficient training or experience to effectively respond to the social nuances of conservation. This is particularly acute with the subject of gender, a topic with which many people are not comfortable. Two-thirds of respondents (10/15) reported that workshops, focus groups and follow-up meetings were the most effective strategies for capacity building.

(3) *Lack of specific materials and technical support* Nearly two-thirds (9/15) of respondents pointed to the need for more interactive materials such as guidelines and toolkits for both staff and community trainings, and the importance of adapting them to the country and/or community context. In addition, project managers from 12 country offices highlighted the need for gender mainstreaming guidelines to be adapted to the country and/or community in which they were to be implemented, to enable staff who may have had limited training to participate in gender-related initiatives. Lack of funding for technical support in project design and implementation, and for initial investments, limits the resources available to effectively integrate gender considerations into conservation initiatives.

(4) *Societal norms* Traditional patriarchal societies contribute to women's limited access to education, lower levels of literacy and lack of self-confidence, and hinders their participation in natural resource management and decision-making. Additionally, the overwhelming amount of work (both within and outside the home) that women are often responsible for can make it difficult for them to engage meaningfully in conservation activities. Finding times when both local women and conservation practitioners (staff of Conservation International or partners) are available for meetings can be challenging. Societal norms also influence the priorities of conservation initiatives themselves, such as the extent to which gender is prioritized in project design and adequately budgeted, and the level of responsibility and influence of the person(s) leading gender on the project team. In addition, the added duty that is placed on the (mostly) female staff members appointed as the project's gender focal points is an example of the gendered work burden echoed in communities.

There was consensus amongst the respondents that the perceived benefits generated from the integration of gender into conservation initiatives outweighed the perceived challenges. This was not unexpected as the project managers we interviewed had self-selected to manage a grant related to gender, so they were already aware of the potential benefits of taking a gender-responsive approach. Nevertheless, we were surprised to see the varied and specific benefits that emerged from the projects supported by these small grants. Some of these benefits even exceeded the grant's original scope, for example in categories (4), gender normative change within project communities, and (5), strengthened partnerships. As an example of gender normative change, the project in Ecuador supported a woman to become the president of her community, and in Cambodia the project influenced women's self-confidence in engaging in community fishery management. Examples of strengthened partnerships include those with governmental environment agencies (in Samoa and the Philippines), with gender entities

such as UN Women in Timor-Leste, with donors (such as USAID in Peru) and with local environmental organizations who needed technical support on gender (Samoa).

Discussion

International and national environmental organizations have largely identified gender equality as a fundamental component of their work, but there is a lag in implementation of gender-related policies and practices. This is in part because field-based conservation practitioners often lack the expertise and skills required to fully understand how gender considerations can help or hinder conservation outcomes, and to respond accordingly. There is a need to (1) examine the barriers that manifest in the context of conservation institutions, both through academic literature and from practitioners themselves, and (2) identify practical ways to reduce and overcome them.

The costs and challenges noted by respondents highlight the financial, technical and cultural barriers that conservation practitioners face when working to integrate gender into their programmes. Our findings indicate that providing small grants to integrate gender in conservation projects provides hands-on experiences for staff, and helps build the skills necessary to design and deliver gender-responsive conservation projects. Furthermore, it can be effective in addressing some of the primary challenges of gender integration described in the literature (e.g. Dawson, 2010; Moser & Moser, 2010; Wendoh & Wallace, 2010; Bennett et al., 2016). These challenges include (1) the need for ongoing training/capacity building, especially for conservation practitioners, (2) the need to apply gender equality principles in a culturally relevant way that builds local ownership, including opportunities for local staff to lead research and develop their own analyses, (3) the need to provide opportunities to apply training concepts in practice, and (4) the lack of dedicated time and focus on gender.

Providing small grants to support gender analysis and integration, however, does not address one of the most common barriers to gender integration (Moser & Moser, 2010): the lack of a mechanism to create accountability, with incentives and sanctions. Providing funding and technical support through guidelines proved to be an effective incentive for those already aware of gender issues to try something new: for many respondents, the projects evaluated here were the first they had designed and managed with a gender focus. However, if gender-responsive projects are only designed when additional funding is available and when practitioners are aware of their importance, their impact will be limited. Donors increasingly require gender-responsiveness, which provides accountability for projects funded by those donors, but organizations must also design accountability systems that ensure full application of gender-responsive

measures across all relevant projects, regardless of specific donor requirements.

There is a large body of literature focused on improving gender expertise amongst development practitioners (e.g. Moser & Moser, 2010; Ferguson, 2014; Mehra et al., 2020), and increasing opportunities for practitioners to develop relevant skills (e.g. the GenderPro Credential; George Washington University, 2021). Likewise, there are numerous studies focused on social science expertise in conservation (e.g. Mascia et al., 2003; Fox et al., 2006; Bennett et al., 2016; Bennett et al., 2017), but relatively little has been published specifically about building gender expertise in the conservation sector, to which this work contributes. Although the conservation community can benefit from the lessons learned on gender issues in the development sector, there are fundamental differences that make a direct application of these lessons challenging. Three key differences include (1) the goals of conservation, (2) training of conservation practitioners and (3) societal norms in remote locations.

The first difference is rooted in what is considered to be the end goal, and how social aspects and gender specifically relate to this goal. Development projects focus on improved outcomes for people (e.g. health, education, livelihoods), whereas in conservation the desired outcome is usually environmental (e.g. ha of forest under better management, number of fish species in a protected area). And although people play a crucial role in achieving conservation goals, and the importance of working with people is now well established, involvement of local communities in conservation projects is still often considered a means to an end. For gender specifically, whereas its fundamental role in efforts to improve health, education and livelihoods is clear, its significance in efforts to better manage forests or protect threatened species is less obvious.

Secondly, conservation training is still too often focused on natural sciences alone, despite a long-standing recognition that considering both social and natural aspects is critical for conservation (Mascia et al., 2003; Fox et al., 2006; Roy et al., 2013; Bennett et al., 2017; Gardner, 2021). This may be even more true of universities in the Global South, where many conservation practitioners are trained (Meli et al. 2019). Without fundamental training in social sciences, and specifically in gender-related issues, conservationists will struggle to apply the lessons from development. Whereas the development community is now routinely incorporating gender into project design and delivery, many in the conservation community are still considering why gender needs to be incorporated.

Thirdly, many development efforts focus on densely populated areas (where education or health interventions can reach the largest number of people), whereas conservation efforts often occur in remote areas. Societal and cultural norms in remote locations are often, although not always, more conservative in terms of gender stereotypes, roles and responsibilities. Conservation practitioners must thus

walk a fine line between advancing gender and social equity, while also operating in a culturally appropriate way (for example when a community may not currently allow women to be in decision-making spaces). Although these challenges may also be present in development efforts in larger population centres, they are generally more acute in remote settings, and lessons from development often cannot be applied directly.

It is for these reasons that more research is urgently needed that focuses on the specific nexus of gender and conservation practice and how to best equip conservation practitioners. We conducted this research specifically to gather perceptions from field-based conservation practitioners, rather than gender specialists. Although some conservation actors prefer to consult external gender experts on the design and sometimes implementation of gender-related projects, building in-house capacity amongst those staff and partners who work directly on community-based conservation is an important way to mainstream gender. As conservation practitioners may be more inclined to listen to each other rather than to gender specialists, given their shared objectives and training, our research can help to shift practitioner dialogue and conservation practice to be more open towards and considerate of gender issues.

This research is limited by the fact that it focused on a small, self-selected sample of conservation practitioners. The practitioners involved in managing these grants and in the subsequent review had already demonstrated an interest in gender (as they were responsible for applying for the grant and implementing the project). Nevertheless, these practitioners operated in field offices and with colleagues who were not necessarily as attuned to gender issues and were in a good position to speak to the challenges and lack of awareness amongst their colleagues. Despite being geographically diverse, our sample is therefore not necessarily representative of conservation professionals more broadly. In addition, the research was entirely qualitative in nature, based on reports and interviews, and did not include any quantitative measures (e.g. documenting an increase in the number of women participating in project activities) to back up the reported perceptions. We were also not able to directly link gender-related interventions to improved conservation outcomes (e.g. better governance or natural resource management). Further research on these projects could provide additional insights, for example on the longer-term impacts of gender-responsiveness on project design and delivery as well as those related to conservation success (including community buy-in, governance and biodiversity/climate goals). Further research on methods to build conservation practitioners' skills and expertise on gender, and documenting and sharing practical methods to address the common challenges that practitioners face, will help to move beyond gender policies and good intentions, towards effective and sustainable implementation and results.

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Conflicts of interest None.

Ethical standards This work abided by the *Oryx* guidelines on ethical standards. Persons quoted gave consent for publication of their statements and interviews were conducted with prior, informed consent.

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