

THE ‘CHAMPIONS FOR TRANSFORMATIVE LEADERSHIP’ INITIATIVE: KENYAN GRASSROOTS WOMEN AS AGENTS OF CHANGE

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Introduction

The experience of local development and women’s empowerment outlined in this case study looks specifically at the progress made by grassroots women in Kenya as transformative agents for development that is responsive to citizens. Grassroots women living and working in their communities, who are inspired to drive change, are daily unleashing their potential and radically transforming governance in their regions.

The 4th UN Conference on women held in Beijing in 1995 heralded the formation of Grassroots Organizations Operating Together in Sisterhood (GROOTS) Kenya. It was formed as a realization of the magnitude of marginalization among women living in poor rural and urban communities. Working in ten out of 47 counties in the country, with over ten years of experience, GROOTS Kenya has systematically invested in mentoring and training grassroots women leaders so as to create a critical mass of individuals who continuously apply their lived experiences to influence policies and programs at local, national and international levels. Through such organized efforts, grassroots women have been able to contribute effectively to the writing and advocating of the national land policy and the new Kenyan Constitution which was promulgated on August 27th 2010.

The Champions for Transformative Leaders initiative currently takes place in three counties: Kiambu county (Gatundu South and North constituencies), Kakamega county (Shinyalu and Ikolomani constituencies) and Laikipia county (Laikipia west and East constituencies), and several men are also now part of the process. Partners such as Huairou Commission and UN Women who support the cause of GROOTS are also stakeholders.

Specific case studies show the far-reaching effects of women’s empowerment due to the participatory championing of accountable governance amongst grassroots women themselves: “The rise of women is a necessary, but not necessarily sufficient condition for the realization of human development” (Fulgham, 2009).

Although grassroots women are proud to have made various gains, the legal, institutional and social framework to provide and sustain a conducive environment for women’s equal

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participation in governance has been wanting. However, with the political dispensation provided in the new Constitution, women's participation in leadership is emphasized more than ever before in Kenya. The Constitution provides a framework for major reforms. Addressing gender inequalities and regional imbalances are important principles embedded in the constitution and are a core reference to the work of GROOTS Kenya in pursuit of effective women's participation in local governance.

Direct and indirect methodologies used to compile data for this case study include: participant-observer data collection, interviews, focus groups and reporting on already-established data to show both quantitative and qualitative results.

Context and policy environment

In Kenya, women form a majority of the population (52%) and it is estimated that 80% of women in Kenya live in rural areas and play a significant role in the agricultural sector. Men, however, dominate leadership and decision-making positions across the board. Kenyan women have developed their own strategy to influence governance processes through coming together in self-help groups to pursue improved services and reduce poverty and as a result have made strides in influencing resources, planning and policy decisions.

The new Kenyan Constitution has generated great hope in liberating the women in this region through clauses in article 10 of Chapter two regarding the participation of both women and men in governance. Provisions have been made for equal opportunity in sectors of the economy, education, health as well as in decentralized government structures, a great contributor to development.

The Champions for Transformative Leadership Initiative also builds on the objectives of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) particularly MDG 3 that promotes gender equality and empowers women, and the Kenya Vision 2030 that envisages Kenya as a middle-income country providing a high quality life to all its citizen by 2030. In this regard GROOTS Kenya successfully trained 114 women leaders on the content of the eight MDGs, assisted them to reflect on women's status in their community and to develop a road map to track institutional progress, and grassroots women's own strategic contributions to the achievements of MDG 3.

GROOTS Kenya Programs

GROOTS Kenya actively works through four thematic campaigns: women's leadership and governance, community responses to HIV and AIDS, women and property and community resilience to disaster and climate change.

A cornerstone program, 'women's leadership and governance' seeks to ensure that women and their communities are actively participating in governance and accountability mechanisms in their communities, including understanding the finances that are available at that level, and participating in decisions made. The program seeks to ensure that policies and frameworks are implemented not just at the international or national level, but also at the local or grassroots level.

To implement the objectives of the program, GROOTS Kenya identifies a core group of women from the community who are willing and interested to participate in governance issues and builds their capacity through: exposure (peer learning exchanges, and national meetings), training on leadership and governance (including the Local to Local Dialogue process), mapping out issues, prioritizing needs and monitoring what is happening in their communities. GROOTS Kenya works to channel information and issues at the national level that has impact at the local, and encourages grassroots participation in community forums organized by the provincial administration to understand what information is available and how to advocate for what their community requires.



Grassroots women strategizing

For example, grassroots women have actively engaged in decision-making structures related to HIV and AIDS funding. In Kenya there are a lot of devolved funding mechanisms which increases the need for grassroots women to understand what money is coming into the community, who is getting it and how is it used. This also relates to other devolved funding such as bursaries and the Constituency Development Fund (CDF). To increase awareness and participation in decision-making GROOTS Kenya led a massive effort to ensure wide understanding and input into the constitutional review process, emphasizing women's rights to participate, to have equal opportunities and to security.

Others could learn from the GROOTS Kenya women's leadership and governance program on how to bring together women in leadership and organizing women at the grassroots level so they can work together and have the power to advocate for their issues.

The community responses to HIV and AIDS program started soon after HIV and AIDS was declared a national disaster in Kenya. The focus is people living with HIV, orphans and vulnerable children, women and men home-based care givers, and elderly women who are shouldering the burden of the orphans left by their daughters and sons. The program seeks to mitigate the impact by lessening the burden of the pandemic on the people infected and affected, such as by helping elderly women through economic empowerment to better address the needs of the children. The program supports home-based care givers in understanding how to cope with the changing trends of HIV and address them effectively; it supports orphans through education and in responding to their psychosocial needs to be able to cope with changes after the loss of parents; and it supports those living with HIV to understand the changing trends and to advocate with the government to address needs such as access to medication, not only ART (anti-retro viral treatment), but also opportunistic infections.

Even though I am HIV positive, my status does not affect my leadership. GROOTS Kenya has built my esteem through training and mentorship from a point where I was on my death bed to this point when I am a respected opinion leader, helping my community. Lucy Njoki, a focal point leader from Laikipia East Constituency

The Home Based Care Alliance is one of the strategies that is used to ensure caregivers are on top of changing trends. GROOTS Kenya formed the alliance to have an organized force that could press for accountability of HIV funding, ensure there is an organized voice to advocate for different issues such as inadequate treatment, and to empower and recognize poor women who have been offering care and support for a long time.

The women and property program began in 2004 after realizing that many of the women and orphans infected or affected with HIV were being thrown out of their homes by their in-laws because of their status. Also, some were suffering from stigma and accusations:

Through the process we realized there was a high rate of land and property rights violations among women and orphans - particularly those affected by HIV and AIDS. This was creating a cycle which enhanced the infection rates, as women who were chased away from their homes were denied access to medication and lost their social safety net thereby increasing infection rates in communities where they weren't known - and also compounding poverty and vulnerability. Explanation given by a member of the watchdog group

The home-based caregivers came up with the Community Land and Property Watch Dog Group as a strategy to promote justice for women and orphans mostly infected by HIV and AIDS. Watch Dog Group members were trained in legal issues as community paralegals to understand the laws related to property and land, and how to use these laws and their status at the community level to address the conflicts related to these issues. They also raised awareness on the rights of women. They function as the mediators, for example when a husband dies: they ensure that appropriate documentation exists before the man is buried that would protect the woman, such as by making sure their relationship is stated in the proceedings. This protects

vulnerable individuals from disinheritance, by foreseeing potential problems. The Watch Dogs encourage people to sort out their problem outside of court to reduce expenses, and use influential people in the community to reach an agreement that would benefit both parties. When courts are involved they mentor the women on how to respond to questions and understand how to defend themselves. They assist them to understand the ins and outs of the legal process: for example, they inform them that the person in court has a right to use their mother tongue and that the court will provide translation. The groups also accompany the person to the court to provide witness statements and ensure that what the court says is implemented. For example, even if the court awards land, they review the papers, provide security and ensure that what is declared is actually implemented!

Although I have been widowed for ten years now, I draw strength from fellow widows who have made it. I myself was disinherited of land and property but with the help of the Watchdog team, I got all my assets back. I will take my leadership further by vying for a political position to ensure effective delivery of services to my community. Rose Angiro
GROOTS Kenya focal point in Homa Bay County

Finally, the community resilience to disaster and climate change program seeks to address the impact of climate change among grassroots women and other vulnerable groups by ensuring food security, good nutrition, and also by engaging in advocacy campaigns to ensure the government responds to their needs emerging from changes in climate.

Under this program GROOTS Kenya works with communities, particularly grassroots women and vulnerable households, to understand the changing climate and how to cope. They use vulnerability mapping to understand risks related to food security and issues that need to be addressed so as to cope with the changing climate. Other than relying on unpredictable rain patterns and planting seasonal crops, women are starting to change technologies to incorporate green houses and planting drought-resistant crops.

Male participation

One strategy we as grassroots women have is not to fight the men. Instead when we want to speak on issues of the community affecting us, we get men on our side. Rachel Wairimu Kanika, an aspiring women councillor in Gatundu for the 2012 elections

I have allowed my wife to do what's necessary for the community. She is capable of leading so I let her do it. It's good for women to lead because most women even in the current parliament are scandal-free where corruption is concerned. - Rachel Wairimu's husband

Women's movements have traditionally stuck with themselves, finding strength and building the movement with other women. However, women's movements in some countries are coming to realize that in order to make advancements in women's empowerment, it is necessary to reach out and work with men.

Men also need to understand women's empowerment and can be a key ally in helping to change the minds of other men. In Kenya, like in many countries across the world, most key leadership positions are held by men, so not organizing with men means missing the opportunity to make political changes, particularly in areas related to health, education, etc. In any community, we cannot change things by speaking only to women. In addition, organizing without men can also lead to mistrust and even violence. In some circumstances, when women met alone without men, there were incidences of gender-based violence (GBV), and this increased a feeling of creating an adversarial group against men. To involve men helps to neutralize negative perceptions and makes it possible to agree on ways to address the development needs of both men and women.

Finally, Kenya's constitutional provisions and legislation surrounding public funds are difficult to obtain by groups made up of women only – unless the funds are intended only for women – therefore participation of women, men and youth increases the ability to access funds for community development. Hellen Kamiri a grassroots women leader and a board member of GROOTS Kenya

The involvement of men is visibly clear in GROOTS Kenya's leadership initiatives in three ways: through a group of male spouses; men who have joined the groups as part of the GROOTS movement; and men in positions of leadership who function as allies. Daniel Njoroge Kamiri, the husband of Hellen, spoke very well of his wife when asked about his participation in regards to Hellen as a leader:

A home is about two people. Hellen and I have been married for twenty five years and I trust her. Without trust no good can come forth. I am proud of her and believe she is a born leader. I am also becoming known in the society and emerging as a leader as well. They say behind every successful man is a woman but I think this can also be said of Hellen and I. Behind every successful woman is a man!

Edward Gitau Macharia is from Kiganjo, Gatundu South Constituency. Edward is a community health worker in the home-based care groups, helping the women and families infected/affected by the HIV/AIDS pandemic. He says, *I am a leader among those who have been neglected, ensuring they receive the attention they may not get elsewhere. A leader does what others will not do. It may be difficult but I do it for the benefit of the society.*

It's interesting to know that the perception of the women as well as the men in the community changed as men joined GROOTS Kenya. Edward reckons:

At first my wife was a bit surprised that I would be serving women, but in no time she began to send needy ladies in the community to me for assistance. Indeed, other men declined the opportunity to work with these women. Some of them came with the expectation that money would be the outcome, and soon left disappointed. GROOTS Kenya proves that grassroots women are very consistent. And when they set their focus to do something and also get male support, they don't back off. Many of the men's perspectives have changed as they see results brought about in the community from the women's efforts.



Men developing an action plan to pursue women's empowerment and gender equality

Joseph is from Gatundu North and has worked closely with GROOTS Kenya members. He is now a respected community elder, a position he claims was given to him after the community noticed his contribution as a member of the watchdog group to get rid of corrupt officials that would rule cases with great discrimination against women. He said:

Customary law was a great barrier. There was no opportunity for women to speak up about their own issues such as wife disinheritance. Having grown up in a polygamous home, I saw how 75% of the benefits of the activities at home went to my dad, not to his two wives. That gave me impetus to speak up for the women. As I challenged my fellow men to elect a woman, it finally happened and now among five men sitting to discuss issues, there is one woman representative. Women in these constituencies are making strides one step at a time in creating impact within the local, regional and national level. The male-dominated environment is becoming less hostile.

Challenges

Implementing policies will not come easily as it is difficult to get rid of retrogressive cultural practices that disempower women “overnight” and those that are embedded in people’s day to day lives. Cultural stereotyping is also a major hindrance: the perception that public leadership is

the man's domain remains rampant among rural communities. For example, in some communities when men win elected positions they are carried shoulder high by fellow men. This was of great concern for women in one focus group who felt it would be shameful for a woman to receive the same treatment as it would expose her body when clothes are lifted up thus shunning the prospect of women leadership.

Currently Kenya has only sixteen elected and six nominated women in the legislature out of 222 members of parliament. This is a mere 10%. The new Constitution has significant gains and demands that at least one third of all elected candidates in the next general election of the National assembly membership should be women. Through the constitution, the country has embraced a county government where there will be 47 women seats reserved (one in each county). The current constitution has increased the constituencies to 290. Twelve slots are reserved for political parties to nominate. In applying the 2/3 gender principle, the increment of women's numbers in the national assembly will translate to a minimum of 116 women parliamentarians an increase to 33%. The next step is to ensure that there is both adequate numbers and capacity to take the opportunity of these provisions.

According to a mapping and profiling survey of the situation of grassroots women in leadership carried out by GROOTS Kenya in March 2011, findings showed that forty-two percent of women in leadership positions at the local level are aged between 36-45 years and 46-60 years. The proportion of women leaders who have attained tertiary and university level education is low, fifteen and ten percent respectively. Since the retirement age for public and state officers is 55-60 years, in such a short time it is difficult for most women to sustain and climb up the leadership ladder in various institutions. Hence the champions for transformative leadership are engaging themselves to bring younger women on board.

Women inevitably multi-task as family care-takers, income-earners as well as community workers. These roles consume women's time and make it difficult to take on leadership responsibilities. However, Hellen, a grassroots women leader in GROOTS Kenya from Gatundu, says this barrier can be overcome with consistent organizing and capacity development: *If women manage to balance their reproductive and productive roles, there is no reason why they cannot be accorded leadership opportunities.*

Violence and intimidation against women is a big challenge for women who seek elective positions. During elections male aspirants competing for similar seats even go as far as offering monetary rewards for women candidates to step down. In a survey carried out in March 2011 by GROOTS one woman civic leader had the following to say:

During the civic elections for mayoral position in 2008, young men were hired to frustrate my ambitions. They bought ladies underwear that was the color white, smeared them with red paint and threw them at me in a public setting. As they were throwing those pants at me, they told me I had forgotten the underwear at a lodge the previous night where I had gone to practice my usual prostitution.

Many grassroots women have the view that once women get elected into positions of leadership, they consistently showed less concern for their constituents, particularly those marginalized and

at the local level. In the same breath, however, they note that women in leadership feel isolated and are often expected to deliver services beyond their ability.

The legal and institutional monitoring mechanisms are lacking. For example, although in 2003 the Kenya government implemented devolved funding policies and which provided that 30% representation of women at all levels of decision-making, there are no formal mechanisms to ensure effective and proper women participation and involvement is guaranteed.

We must re-educate the men; sit in meetings with them as women really cannot be elected just for the women. They need the men to support them, as a woman leader is a representative of the people rather than just the women. Pastor Edward, Gatundu

Unfortunately the theory that women are their own enemies is highly perpetuated in many communities. Similarly, men have a long way to go to widely appreciate women's leadership. Some men will not attend a meeting if a woman is chairing it!

District level impact

GROOTS Kenya, through the Champions for Transformative Leadership Initiative, has been highly acknowledged by local leaders, including the District Level leadership. In addition, more women have taken up leadership positions in the provincial administration and the devolved funding committees which are at the district level (district technical committees). Initially in the provincial administration, women feared to take up difficult cases and the community didn't have confidence in them. Moreover, the way that the elections for the administrators were done, they favored men in terms of education and place of residence (to become a provincial administrator you have to stay in the community for a certain period of time while women move into a new community after marriage). But with greater awareness and influencing the creation of gender equality policies there is now a shift to support and appreciate women's leadership.

Also, women's involvement has promoted better governance of district level resources: 1) women are now part of key leadership teams (mostly treasurers) of district level committees; 2) they understand how to contribute to these committees, criticize their decisions, identify what funding has come and community priorities and needs; 3) many of the women are the ones that say: *"In the past I used to sign checks before the amount or payee is written because that was my job, now I'm looking at the payee, the reason, and that the intended use is completed"*.

Finally, District Officials in different constituencies where GROOTS is working are openly advocating for partnerships between the Champions and local officials.

Hellen's testimonial

In 1997, I started organizing village women in what is called a merry-go-round. There were about fourteen women who would come to the house and we would save ten shillings weekly. When I joined GROOTS in 2003, ten of us were taken through Train-the-Trainer sessions and organized to address the impact of HIV AIDS in the community. This was an eye-opener to me as we began to put the tools we had received into action. I did not initially see myself as a leader but the more I interacted with the community and received

strength from GROOTS Kenya officials in Nairobi, the more vocal I became. Whereas I could not speak in English because I was not confident to do so, now I speak to hundreds of groups because I want to have an impact on my society. In 2006 I organized an ad hoc three-day leadership training workshop with thirteen groups, totalling up to 165 members. In 2007 we registered as a Community Based Organization (CBO). Currently two women are chiefs and four are assistant chiefs in our group. Women have penetrated the district level garnering development seats of up-to 45 women as sub-local officials. To date, this small group that begun



with training ten women has grown to 45 sub-groups with an average of 30 grassroots women members each. We have included some men and we strategically work with many others who are very instrumental. We are now the champions for transforming leadership in our communities and plan to ensure that women are equally respected as effective leaders as is provided for in this constitution. Hellen Wairimu Kamiri, Focal Point Leader for Gatundu South (in the photograph above, Hellen facilitating local to local dialogue on devolved funding)

According to statistics, the Financial Committees hosting the Constituency Development Fund (CDF) have two women who come from this grassroots group. The government has recently posted two women District Officers (DOs) in Gatundu South Constituency and one in Gatundu North who have become a strong motivation to other grassroots women aspiring for leadership. They receive leadership support from Hellen's group and are working closely with members of champions for transformative leadership.

Although this area has had a prevalence of violence against women, women now understand their rights in view of the Constitution of Kenya and the MDGs. Women in the grassroots are able to articulate projects and programs within the context of lived experiences in the local setting as well as at the national level. Women in GROOTS Kenya are bridging the gap between those called to leadership in visible positions as well as those in the market place and elsewhere. We say as women, we are all leaders and thus should offer support to one another. Violet Shivutse, a Focal Point Leader in Western Kenya

We have seen great impact on the ground by GROOTS Kenya through the Champions for Transformative Leadership project which has organized grassroots women to unite and empowered them towards engaging with local development. We see two major results:

capacity building is taking place poverty is being eradicated...When you educate women about their rights, you empower them. We see many grassroots women leaders sitting on different committees and boards such as the Land Board. Women in Ikolomani have established institutions of micro-finance and formed groups to assist them in getting loans. This area receives a lot of rainfall but unfortunately the land holding capacity for a population of 110,000 people is only 800 people per square kilometer. As such traditional farming methods alone cannot offer food security so we import maize from the neighboring provinces. This initiative is changing perspectives among community members on how to exploit and become innovative in managing resources they have sustainably. Philip Nzungu, Ikolomani District Commissioner

This is the same model used in Kendu Bay where I was previously serving and I am very comfortable with it. GROOTS Kenya's work is very complimentary to the work we do at the District Level, and it is a very meticulous organization. We have people on the ground with very good practice. They willingly give information like the watchdogs, suggesting the ways to deal with issues in society and they are very honest. GROOTS Kenya's investment in grassroots women empowerment is bearing fruits to an extent that we have a woman assistant chief directing the entire community on government-related administrative issues. The new Constitution is giving the women democratic space and I am sure that these women will surprise us during the upcoming 2012 elections. Thomas Siele Kipng'eno, Shinyalu District Officer

Partnerships

According to Lucy Kihia-Mathenge, Program Officer for United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and Empowerment of Women- Gender & Governance, Democracy and Human Rights:

GROOTS Kenya has a great transformative leadership process and we consider them a strategic partner. They are an effective and organized grassroots network at the local and national levels. They have a unique way they engage women at grassroots level. It is quite a unique niche! One of the ways they monitor and implement their strategies is through mapping.” She adds: “Through GROOTS’ participation in civic education the grassroots women can now be involved in decision making at various levels. Although they encourage women to vie for political seats or positions, they see leadership in a broader perspective and their initiatives empower the ordinary woman on the ground as well as reaching out to women leaders in the church. Between now (July 2011) and elections (2012), there will be a big impact from these women. There is a lot of organizing taking place, moving of the masses in places like Kakamega and elsewhere. If this continues, we will see many women step into their leadership potential at every strata of society.

Critical elements that have led to success

Profiling of women currently holding positions of leadership at local levels is both key as well as rewarding. GROOTS Kenya strategically engages other women leaders who have strong understanding of the movement such as Chiefs, civic leaders and heads of community

organizations to map and profile women leaders. In so doing, women leaders are able to bond, appreciate each others as leaders, and build a strong alliance for collective advocacy.

Political processes in Kenya are considered the domain of men. This initiative engages men to champion the role of women's leadership which has given significant mileage of success.

Often, individuals seeking political positions relocate to villages during campaign period. This initiative, to the contrary, has ensured that women who have been successfully organizing in their village towards other developmental goals are collectively supported to vie for political positions.

The Champions for Transformative Leadership Initiative takes advantage of international advocacy opportunities and events to publicize the issue of women in leadership. For example during the International Women's Day, the task force members sensitized their communities on women's empowerment and gender equality. The initiative is working closely with other national efforts such as the Kenyan National Civic Education Program to complement the technical expertise needed to comprehend legal interpretation of the new constitution. To sustain the knowledge in the community, the initiative engaged grassroots women, too, as trainers on the content alongside these experts.

Conclusion

Development should be an end result of communities and individuals having the opportunities to create the sort of society they want. For far too long, communities have been treated as mere recipients of development grants and activities. It is clear that transformative development is assured to take root if poor people, those in need and most marginalized, take centre stage to drive the demand for accountability and provide leadership on where appropriate shifts must take place in policies and program development. Grassroots women are no doubt a major actor and strong champions for positive change in the society. It is a set of judgments about what constitutes the good the society has achieved (Barkan and McNulty, 1979). According to Melkote and Steeves (2001), participation means that that people are subjects of policy; they need to be involved in the definition, design, and execution of the development process. The authors further assert that well-written policies alone cannot necessarily deliver the desired change. Involvement of the people in the implementation of such policies determines success. Entrenching 2/3 gender principle in the Kenyan constitution is a first good step, but it will only be actualized when communities take full responsibility to make it happen.

For men to be involved in pursuing women's empowerment and gender equality they must see that this approach delivers positive change for the good of the society and is not only beneficial to women. As well, it is not only the responsibility of women seeking elective and appointed positions to guarantee the quality and quantity of leadership generally. Women's empowerment and gender equality programs should invest in women's organizing on the ground to support and maintain women's leadership.

GROOTS Kenya seeks to maintain this bottom-up participatory approach to achieve women's empowerment as well as to contribute to positive local development.



A national meeting of Women Champions for Transformative Leadership, September 2011

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