

Maasai Women's Perspectives on Equitable Ranger Programs in Kenya

Corinne Boyd¹; Jana Smith-Perry¹; Ketito (Cynthia) Kileken²; Mara Dicenta Vilker¹; Erica Garroutte¹; Hellen Kayiaa² and Pheona Meneto²

¹Institute for Integrative Conservation, William & Mary, Virginia USA

²South Rift Association of Land Owners, Kenya

E-mail: egarroutte@wm.edu

Date completed *December 17th, 2024*

Women play a disproportionately important role in conservation and community well-being but often face barriers to engagement and empowerment in the conservation field. Women ranger programs have become a popular strategy for engaging women and the unique role they play in their societies, in the protection of wildlife and ecosystem services. Despite their popularity, there lacks an understanding from women rangers about how to best structure programs to promote the conservation and well-being goals for women rangers.

The primary objective of the research was to document the perspectives of the South Rift Association of Land Owners (SORALO) women rangers on how to best structure the women's ranger program, aiming to understand the role of women in Maasai culture, investigate lessons from other programs, explore SORALO's goals, and examine perspectives on multi-gender initiatives. Using interviews and observational data, the study revealed key findings about the program in southern Kenya. Women rangers balance multiple identities as Maasai women and conservation professionals, navigating evolving societal roles and gender-specific challenges while having significant community impacts. The research highlights the importance of mutual support between men and women rangers and the need for programs to adapt to changing roles. These insights can inform the design of more inclusive and effective conservation initiatives that leverage the unique strengths and perspectives of women rangers, benefiting organizations like SORALO and others seeking to develop or enhance women ranger programs.

Keywords: *women rangers, conservation, gender equity, Maasai, southern Kenya*

1. Introduction

Across the globe, women play important roles in conservation, bringing fresh perspectives and enriching decision-making processes. Their involvement fosters a broader representation of community interests and concerns, leading to more effective and

sustainable conservation outcomes. Women often possess intimate knowledge of local ecosystems and natural resources, gained through daily interactions with the environment, which can inform holistic and contextually appropriate conservation strategies. A study by Kame Westerman on

gender-related grants found that incorporating women in conservation initiatives improved project quality, with approximately half of respondents reporting that a more holistic approach—considering the needs and roles of both women and men—enhanced outcomes (Westerman, 2021). Conservation efforts involving women also tend to prioritize community well-being alongside environmental protection, as women frequently reinvest earnings and resources into their families and communities, improving livelihoods and fostering social cohesion. Furthermore, women in conservation leadership roles challenge gender stereotypes, inspire future generations, and promote gender equality in both conservation and broader societal contexts.

Despite their contributions, women face significant barriers to empowerment and leadership in conservation. Social norms often discourage women from pursuing conservation careers by associating outdoor and scientific work with men's tasks, which limits career opportunities and demoralizes women expressing interest (Ollos, 2021). Women who do enter the field are often paid less and promoted less frequently than their male counterparts (James et al., 2023). These barriers are often systemic, rooted in structures designed around men's needs and expected roles. For instance, many women ranger programs replicate designs from men's programs without considering gender-specific needs. To address these challenges, it is essential to encourage women to take on conservation roles while redesigning existing structures to align with women's goals and strengths. This approach will enable women to reach their full potential in the field while fostering more inclusive and effective conservation practices.

Women ranger programs have become a popular conservation strategy and have shown the important role that women play in mitigating wildlife-human conflicts, yet there is little known about how to best structure ranger programs for women. Women hold a

unique role in conservation, and their involvement in the field has been shown to promote a better working environment, improve community relations, increase biodiversity, and drastically decrease poaching. Women's ranger programs have a huge variety of broad potential impacts, but current programs highlight specific successes. In South Africa, the Black Mambas have seen an 89% decrease in regional poaching (Danoff-Burg and Ocañas, 2022). Participating rangers also expressed a greater sense of self-agency, self-efficacy, diplomacy, and community – all of which were rooted in program participation. The added influence of motherhood and maternal duties led to the establishment of a child-focused conservation program, Bush Babies Environmental Education Program, educating future generations about the importance of conservation (The Point Foundation, 2023). This sense of motherhood is reflected in the way the women function as rangers, and is potentially the reason they have utilized more community-focused tactics. Similarly, the women of Team Lioness have also found pride and empowerment in their career. One ranger stated that “in the traditionally patriarchal society men are amazed” (Escudero 2020) and another is “always proud of seeing [herself] walking with men in the bush and proud to be the very first female ranger from [her] community.” (Sachs, 2021).

While women's ranger initiatives have been successful in numerous ways, global implementations of ranger programs have also faced a variety of challenges. Globally, women continue to face inequity in conservation, as a 2023 study of The Nature Conservancy international staff found that “women face multiple barriers across their conservation careers due to gender bias,” and “women experience sexual harassment and discrimination, as well as fear retaliation, more than men,” (James et al). There are many examples of this, as Nepalese women foresters were coerced into administrative roles (Christie and Giri 2011), over half of surveyed Latin American women rangers feel their

workplace contributes to gender inequity (Elligson 2023), and gender-based violence is a persistent danger for American women rangers (US National Park Service 2017). Further, Seager proposed that a culture of harassment and discrimination is a major reason many women do not pursue ranger careers (2021). These common challenges of discrimination and unfairness reveal the importance of tailoring women's ranger programs to what the *women* need. Listening to and prioritizing the input of women allows for the creation of an equitable, women-focused structure that aims to create sustainable and powerful roles for women in conservation.

Designing a women's ranger program centered on the goals and unique conservation perspective of women is particularly important in southern Kenya, which is a biodiversity hotspot and home to the Maasai community. The Maasai community is a pastoral society with deep cultural and regional ties to the area. Southern Kenya is also home to hundreds of endangered species and thousands of kilometers of open land. There are many ranger programs across Southern Kenya that have traditionally been designed for and primarily consisted of men, whose responsibility is to prevent human-wildlife conflicts across the region. While the male ranger programs have many members, there is a need for female rangers to provide more support and combat environmental concerns, poaching, and deforestation. Being a female ranger also provides new livelihoods and financial support for the women of the community and the women provide a unique role as rangers in their community needed for continued conservation and preservation of their land. Being a woman ranger not only opens up new financial opportunities, but also allows women apply their unique role in their society to enhance the goals of the ranger program. As mentioned earlier, many of the women rangers choose to educate the community and younger generations through programs they run in their spare time. This promotes awareness of sustainable actions and

promotes respect for wildlife and the environment.

The South Rift Association of Landowners (SORALO) is an association of local landowners who run a variety of conservation initiatives. SORALO aims to ensure the coexistence of people and wildlife through innovative local conservation models, ecological conservation, and community empowerment. The ranger program is designed to help prevent environmental crimes (such as poaching or illegal resource use), mediate human-wildlife conflict (HWC), and serve the general mission of keeping both people and wildlife safe. SORALO is working to ensure that the ranger program is accessible and supportive of women rangers because they recognize the important role that women play in Maasai society and conservation. Despite their success in engaging women in the ranger program in the last few years, SORALO is interested in exploring from the perspective of women rangers how to best structure the program to ensure it aligns with the goals of the women to enhance their broader conservation impact.

The goal of this research is to document the perspectives of SORALO's women rangers on how to best structure the program to advance conservation outcomes and support the goals of Maasai women. This project is done in collaboration with SORALO and Conservation Nation, which is a conservation non-governmental organization with a mission "to diversify the conservation movement by funding and supporting conservationists from underrepresented communities while educating and inspiring the next generation of leaders."

Our research question is "How can women's ranger programs be successfully implemented and sustained within the existing structures of the Maasai context?" In answering this question, we hope to encourage the growth of a women's ranger program, allowing more Maasai women to achieve their desired goals

for the program while also improving conservation outcomes.

- Understand the roles, priorities, and evolving experiences of Maasai women as they relate to women's ranger programs.
- Analyze Maasai women rangers' experiences, aspirations, and challenges within the SORALO ranger program
- Explore how women rangers balance conservation work, family responsibilities, and community expectations.
- Examine men rangers' perspectives on working within a multi-gender ranger program.
- Identify lessons from women ranger programs in Kenya and globally relevant to SORALO's program development
- Summarize key themes and recommendations to support equitable and effective women ranger programs.

The intended impact of the research is to provide SORALO and other ranger programs with a summary of women rangers' perspectives, and clear actions, regarding how ranger programs can be shaped.

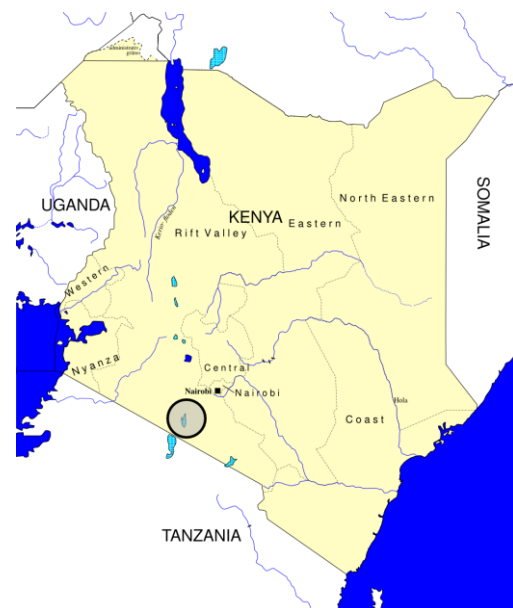
2. Methods

2.1 Study Area or Relevant Context – SORALO La'Lenok Ranger Base

SORALO's La'Lenok Ranger Base and the surrounding area, Magadi, Kenya, is our area of study. The area of study is located in Kenya's Southern Rift Valley. After severe droughts in 2007 and 2010, large animal aerial counts were done in 2010 and 2013 showing that the elephant population, along with other large wild mammals, in Magadi was severely reduced compared to Amboseli. (Okello et al, 2015) Because of this, there are multiple conservation initiatives in place surrounding Magadi and other regions near the Tanzanian border.

Within Magadi, the predominant indigenous inhabitants are the Maasai people. They have lived in Kenya for thousands of years and until the twentieth century, were the dominating tribe in the country. Maasai knowledge is evoked in conservation planning proposals, yet Maasai participation as knowledgeable actors in conservation activities on their lands remains extremely limited. To properly create and implement a female ranger program, we must include every voice and place importance on Indigenous values to produce something that lasts.

Finally, we identified a few important stakeholders who we plan to both keep informed and attempt to meet all goals. These include but are not limited to SORALO, Conservation Nation, the Maasai people within Kenya, existing Magadi and Kenyan ranger programs, the Magadi community, and the IIC.



2.2. Approach 1 - Interview Data (In-Person Interviews)

The bulk of the research was conducted via interviews. In the field, we primarily conducted in-person interviews with established women rangers, in-training women rangers, men rangers, and key informants. Key informants include families of women rangers, station leads, base leads,

and group ranch leads. All interviews were organized with the assistance of SORALO's field station research staff.

Interviews were guided by a pre-established set of questions developed through mentor advice and a literature review, with unique sets tailored for established women rangers, trainees, male rangers, and key informants. Women rangers were asked about their motivations, challenges, aspirations, and the impact of evolving societal roles in Maasai culture, while male rangers provided perspectives on multi-gender collaboration. Key informants shared insights on program design and conservation goals. Questions also explored societal roles, personal values, program structure, and challenges such as balancing family responsibilities, overcoming gender biases, and safety concerns. Interviewees could skip questions or raise additional topics. The research protocol was approved by an Institutional Review Board (IRB) to ensure ethical standards, including informed consent and confidentiality.

Data were audio-recorded, with consent, transcribed, and thematically analyzed to identify key patterns. Observational data from ranger training and community interactions complemented the interviews. Data was then stored in a virtual, confidential platform.

2.3. Approach 2 - Interview Data (Zoom Interviews)

The bulk of the research was conducted via interviews. Via Zoom, we also conducted virtual interviews with international key informants. Key informants include professionals in the ranger field, across diverse regions and specific involvements.

Interview data was collected through transcription of these interviews, either in real-time or with the assistance of recording software. Data was then stored in a virtual, confidential platform.

2.4 Approach 3 - Synthesis of Themes

After completing the collection of data, the researcher's objectives were further addressed via an analytical synthesis of themes. Researchers meticulously sorted through the data, establishing overarching themes relevant to the project's objective via sorting and prevalence of key terms. Once themes were established, they were discussed with external and internal partners and revised in response to provide feedback. Finally, these themes were used to outline the project's key findings, discussions, and results.

3. Deliverables and key takeaways

3.1 Key Finding 1 - Women Rangers Hold Multiple Identities:

"A Ranger is a Ranger, but [she] is also a woman."

Within our research, we learned that the many roles' women play in Kenya often overlap and build upon each other. For the women we interviewed, being a Maasai woman was the most defining expression of identity within their many social groups and communities. Their traditional roles in society are taking care of livestock, children, and their family. However, these roles are currently changing as women have pushed for ways to also attend schools, choose their husbands, and work formal jobs.

Within the context of being a ranger, the women we interviewed emphasized that "A ranger is a ranger". This statement reveals that they see no difference between men and women rangers when it comes to their ability to do the job. The ranger role has traditionally been associated with men, but the women rangers made it clear that they do not see a difference and do not want there to be a distinction between the ranger role for men and women as they are both doing the same position. This theme came up frequently in the conversations with the rangers and was observed in the ranger training and orientation, that all rangers are treated the same, have the same requirements, train the

same way, wear the same uniform, and are treated with the same level of respect. It was clear that the women interviewed identified as rangers, which is an identity shared by all genders in the SORALO program and an identity they were proud of.

While the women identified as rangers, they also identified as women in Maasai society as exemplified by this quote “A ranger is a ranger, but [she] is also a woman”. While the women made it clear that they identify as rangers and that there is no gendered difference to the role, they emphasized that they also have an identity as Maasai women and that their unique perspective as Maasai women enhances their ability to be an effective ranger. Their perspective on what the ranger position is informed by their experiences and values as women, bringing a different set of skills and sensibilities to the job. This doesn't mean they're less capable as rangers; rather, they're enriching the role with their distinct viewpoint. The role of a ranger - protecting wildlife, patrolling conservation areas, and enforcing environmental laws - is not altered by being a woman. Their identity as women doesn't diminish their identity as rangers, but rather enhances it, allowing them to bring their knowledge as Maasai women with conservation practices.

Women rangers play an important role in the community. They play key roles in knowledge sharing and motivate the surrounding community, specifically the younger women. One woman ranger who was interviewed explained this, saying, “The younger generation is able to see what the women do – allowing them to consider pursuing a career in conservation.” This finding challenges Eurocentric feminist theories that often portray men as the primary role models and knowledge bearers in society, while relegating women to roles of nurturing and reproduction. In Maasai society, women are recognized as knowledge bearers worthy of emulation, not just as caregivers. This perspective offers valuable insights to mainstream conservation, highlighting the importance of recognizing

and leveraging women's unique knowledge and roles in environmental stewardship. It demonstrates how indigenous cultures can provide alternative models for gender roles in conservation, potentially enriching and diversifying approaches to environmental protection and community engagement.

These identifications, as women and rangers, tend to be deeply interconnected, creating a complex and nuanced position for Maasai women rangers. Women are most often the first to experience or see the environmental impacts of common issues such as pollution or overgrazing, since they take care of livestock and the home. This means that both as a Maasai woman and as a woman ranger, they are heavily involved in conservation, with these identities reinforcing and complementing each other. One of the women rangers interviewed emphasized this idea,

“Women like a mother, they don't want to destroy what they value; but even if there was no conservation, when you go to get firewood, you don't cut the whole tree you cut the branches – [it] shows the caring of a woman, mother and lady.”

Maasai women act as both caregivers and conservationists, though these roles may present unique challenges and potential contradictions. Each task, even one as regular and simple as cutting firewood, has an environmental impact that historically, women think about and see first before the larger community. This interconnection involves mutual reinforcement of traditional and professional roles, knowledge transfer between cultural practices and conservation techniques, and evolving social dynamics. A 2020 study found that “rural women in Kenya and elsewhere have played vital roles in sustaining household supplies of water and firewood by carefully maintaining their surrounding natural environment.” (Ondiba, Hesborn Andole, and Kenichi Matsui, 2020) Because they are conservation first responders, they have a great understanding of the surrounding landscape and environment.

Their identities as women, rooted in traditional care practices, set them up uniquely for the job of a ranger, allowing them to bridge traditional practices with ongoing broader conservation efforts.

SORALO's women ranger program represents a significant shift in the traditional roles of Maasai women, offering a space where their multiple identities can thrive in more interconnected and less conflictual ways. This environment helps to bridge these identities, supporting Maasai women's efforts to overcome societal barriers by enabling them to pursue a career while maintaining their roles as mothers, thereby increasing the legitimacy and acceptance of their professional endeavours. While Maasai women have always been involved in caring for livestock and family, and teaching children, the ranger program introduces several new elements. As rangers, these women now receive professional recognition and formal employment in conservation, a field traditionally not open to them. They gain expanded knowledge and skills through training in ecology and conservation techniques, allowing them to contribute to environmental efforts in new, more structured ways. Importantly, the program gives women a direct voice in conservation decisions and community affairs, areas traditionally dominated by men in Maasai society. Many of the women interviewed expressed how becoming a ranger has changed their lives, with one saying,

"I became my own community voice, I am respected in the community because of my job, and treated the same as male rangers in the community. My living standards have changed, and I have sent my siblings to school."

The job provides economic empowerment, allowing women to improve their living standards and support their families financially. As rangers, these women become role models, challenging traditional gender norms and inspiring younger generations of

Maasai girls. Additionally, they now play a crucial role in mediating between wildlife conservation efforts and community needs. Women who are also rangers are raising families while teaching their children about conservation, creating a unique harmony that allows Maasai women to contribute to conservation efforts in ways that were not previously possible within their traditional societal structure. SORALO's place in the changing roles of women in Maasai society is to continue to offer gender-equal opportunities, supporting this transformative integration of traditional and modern roles.

3.2 Key Finding 2 - Women's Role in Maasai Society is Evolving

Ranger programs themselves must evolve too, while also welcoming this dynamic nature

The role of Maasai women in society is transforming. Historically, Maasai women were primarily responsible for taking care of livestock, children, and their families. However, these roles are evolving as women push for greater opportunities. They are now attending schools, choosing their husbands, and pursuing careers outside the home. This shift is evident in the increasing number of Maasai women participating in vocational training programs, such as plumbing, hairdressing, and information technology. (IFAW, 2003) Furthermore, women are gaining new opportunities for empowerment in areas such as income generation, access to education, and healthcare. The changing landscape has also led to women having more say in household decision-making, particularly in matters related to agriculture, children's education, and local travel (IFAW, 2003).

Women ranger programs are a part of this dynamic nature of women in society as they provide new professional opportunities and financial support for women, engage women in a new role as conservation leaders in their society, and provide educational and professional development opportunities for

women. As one woman ranger noted, "When other young girls see women rangers, they become encouraged to also become rangers – they see it as accessible." These programs are challenging traditional gender norms and inspiring future generations of Maasai girls. Women rangers serve as role models in their communities, demonstrating that women can excel in traditionally male-dominated fields.

The impact extends beyond the individual, as women rangers often send their salaries home, enabling their siblings or children to attend school and support their parents. This financial contribution helps increase education rates and perpetuates a cycle of empowerment and inspiration among young women in the community. As one respondent observed, "Women and girls are getting educated, which is causing a change in the community" (Respondent 7). By providing women with jobs, titles, and uniforms, ranger programs are helping to change community perceptions of women in positions of power.

3.3 Key finding 3 - Men and Women Rangers: How Program Success Relies Upon Mutual Support

Building a Community Among Rangers

Positive support of women rangers from their male counterparts is critical for a successful program, and was a common theme highlighted by both men and women rangers. From our interviews, it was clear that men rangers are a significant support system for women. The role of men in supporting Maasai women rangers is crucial for the success and legitimacy of women's ranger programs. Despite the traditional patriarchal structure of Maasai society, male rangers have emerged as significant allies rather than barriers for their female counterparts.

In Maasai culture, men traditionally hold positions of power and decision-making authority. As one interview response noted, "They [men] act as lawmakers, they make laws in the community at least they say things

that the community will follow and they protect their families from wars or other things that are against the community." (Men Ranger Focus Group) This influential role of men in shaping community norms and practices makes their support essential for the acceptance and success of women's ranger programs.

Male rangers have become important advocates for their female colleagues. They recognize the unique strengths and perspectives that women bring to conservation efforts. This collaborative spirit is evident in the desire to integrate patrol groups. By championing women's ranger programs and advocating for their integration, men in Maasai society are playing a vital role in reshaping gender norms and empowering women in conservation efforts. This support is crucial for the continued success and expansion of women's ranger programs, paving the way for more inclusive and effective conservation initiatives in Maasai communities.

Many influential men rangers play important roles in ensuring the success of the ranger program while also vouching for the program's legitimacy. As seen in our interview responses, men rangers support the women's program, and each gender has expressed the desire to integrate patrol groups. They explain that "We are working together. So we are together, so we have to work in one." (Mixed Ranger Recruits)

Men in Maasai society hold many roles and are leaders in Maasai society, as emphasized by one of our interview responses saying, "They [men] act as lawmakers, they make laws in the community at least they say things that the community will follow and they protect their families from wars or other things that are against the community." (Men Ranger Focus Group). Due to this, men play an important role in shaping programs and supporting women's role and empowerment in ranger programs.

3.4 Key Finding 4 - Past, Present, and Future: Perceptions and Desires

Broader Community Impacts of the Ranger Program

Women ranger interviewees frequently expressed clear goals for their future, demonstrating a strong commitment to conservation and a desire for personal growth. Women commonly articulated hopes of continuing impactful careers in conservation, with some aspiring to create their own conservation-oriented organizations. This indicated a true passion for conservation as a common motivator for participating in the program.

Women frequently viewed their participation in the program as a means to improve their personal social standing and that of their families' future generations. Additionally, many women expressed deep passion pertaining to conservation and the environment. Many rangers express how their work directly benefits their families, with one stating, "[her] work helps [her] family as [she] is able to provide for them." Another ranger noted that, "in the future we would be able to educate our children and get other jobs," while another shared that "if [she grows her] family will also grow." Thus, many women see the program as a catalyst for social, environmental, and economic change.

One ranger shared that, "she wants to improve her life and standard of living" while another stated that she "is hoping to be impactful in conservation." These personal aspirations extend to a larger vision for women in conservation, with responses emphasizing a hope to motivate and inspire other women to join the field. One ranger emphasized, "[the SORALO program is] really bringing women's ranger voices to be heard," also suggesting that it is enabling "local women to be leaders," and "bring change in society," while also creating a network of "women who can mentor others, women who fight for big positions." This reflects a desire not only for

individual advancement but for systemic change and increased representation of women in conservation leadership.

Many women share that the ranger program has had a significant impact on the community, in addition to their future desires for themselves and their children. This perspective is especially evident in the aspirations women hold for their daughters. A strong emphasis within the data indicates that SORALO's women rangers would encourage their daughters to become rangers. Alternatively, as one Team Lioness member stated, "If [her daughter] had interest, [she would recommend] not the position she is but a higher and better position, [giving her daughter] the best education...so [her daughter] can get a higher position." This sentiment reflects a desire for intergenerational progress, with women envisioning enhanced educational and career opportunities for their daughters within the conservation sector.

3.5 Key Finding 5 - Home at and Away from the Ranger Base

Women rangers face unique challenges in balancing their careers with family responsibilities and personal needs – especially in regard to spending time away from home. The desire for improved accommodations and the struggle of being away from home for extended periods of time are recurring themes among the interviewed women rangers. Exemplifying the desire for better accommodations, one ranger stated,

“rangers need to live in a conducive environment with good housing – children should not be living in a tent.” Others emphasized the parallel desires for privacy and comfort, with one ranger emphasizing her desire for “more rooms instead of everyone sharing one.”

The interviewed women rangers share a common concern pertaining to time away from home. As one ranger states, “working

away from home makes it a challenge to balance family time and work.” This sentiment is common among rangers, but also family members of rangers. The mother of a ranger shared that, “the challenge is that she doesn’t have more time at home so maybe she finds time missing home.” The expectations of husbands also play a significant role, as a ranger shares that her “husband wants [her] to be close to home.” Regardless of this difficulty, one woman acknowledged that, though “being away from home is not good,” it “must be accepted since it is the job.”

The women expressed a common sentiment that time away from family is a difficult aspect of the ranger career. As one ranger stated, “working away from home makes it a challenge to balance family time and work.” Though this is a necessary feature of the job, it is worth considering the strain it may place upon rangers, potential rangers, and ranger families. Additionally, the women expressed a common desire for improved physical accommodations – specifically noting a desire for child-appropriate accommodations. This too, is valuable insight into the experiences and struggles of the women rangers.

3.6 Key Finding 6 - Barriers for Women - Gender-Specific Struggles Remain

The integration of women into SORALO’s ranger program has been significantly successful, exemplified by one woman’s assertion that, “what a man can do, [women] can do.” Her statement reflects the growing recognition that women rangers are equally as capable as men rangers. However, despite many advances, women continue to face unique, gendered challenges when working as rangers.

Women rangers shared that they face barriers originating from familial expectations. One ranger shared that, “when you are a female ranger and have a family, it is a challenge.” Others shared similar experiences, stating that “as a woman [she] has a family and other things [she] must take care of.” One woman

also shared a further barrier, stating that her “husband wants [her] to be close to home.” These expectations of familial duty are specific to women, thus, they create gender-specific challenges.

Women rangers shared that they also face barriers originating from societal expectations. One ranger reported that “community members do not recognize the efforts of women rangers.” Another ranger echoed this sentiment, confidently stating that “the problem is that communities are against women rangers.” These comments represent a significant experience women rangers face.

Women rangers also experience physical differences that may, temporarily, disadvantage them as rangers. Motherhood is an important part of life as a Maasai woman (citation needed), thus many women rangers may become pregnant at some point in their career. A station lead (key informant) shared his perspective on this matter, stating that, “women may also be pregnant, or having some other condition that is not well-suited for the wild,” thus revealing a barrier pertaining to gendered physicality, as women are possibly perceived as less capable, due to potential pregnancies.

Women rangers primarily discussed the existence of barriers pertaining to familial expectations and societal doubt. Women shared that they struggled to be away from their families and also that they struggled with negative community perceptions. While time away from home is essential to the career, international informants have utilized possible tactics that will be further discussed in the recommendation section. Similarly, there have been multiple methods of community engagement that have aimed to counteract negative community perceptions of women rangers, which will be further discussed in the recommendation section.

4. Recommendations

4.1 – Supporting Leadership

In our responses we found a strong emphasis that passion for wildlife and conservation is a dominant motivation, with multiple women rangers citing this as a primary reason for joining the program. Additionally, multiple of the respondents emphasized a desire for community change, reflecting a broader sense of purpose beyond individual benefits. Interaction with wildlife and nature is a significant highlight, mentioned by many participants, and their self-perception as rangers is closely tied to their conservation efforts. Literature supports these findings, showing that both men and women experience tangible personal and community benefits from ranger programs, including leadership development, skill acquisition, and improved social status. For men, financial and career motivations were more prominent, with some also expressing a passion for conservation. Men's roles often required prior qualifications, such as knowledge of local languages (e.g., Maa, Swahili, and English) and secondary education, as well as deep familiarity with their community. This contrast in motivations and prerequisites highlights differing pathways and expectations for men and women rangers, though both groups contribute significantly to conservation efforts and community well-being. These insights underscore the importance of ranger programs in fostering both environmental stewardship and socio-economic development.

4.2 - Recognizing Women Rangers' Multiple Roles and Responsibilities

Insights from interviews with women rangers highlight the unique roles and contributions women bring to conservation efforts. Women's multiple identities, as community members, caregivers, and resource users, provide SORALO with a rich foundation for advancing its mission. Building on their roles as community members and resource users,

the program should harness the knowledge women possess, particularly through their daily interactions with the environment.

Beyond their environmental expertise, women also hold significant social influence, positioning them as powerful advocates for conservation within their communities. Women's ability to influence societal perspectives, particularly those of men, underscores their potential as change agents in conservation. Offering women leadership platforms and opportunities for information sharing can amplify their voices. By integrating these strategies, SORALO can empower women to drive meaningful conservation efforts while fostering greater inclusivity and sustainability in its programs. Recognizing the dynamic roles women play, SORALO should maintain a malleable program structure that adapts to their evolving needs and priorities. Supporting women in balancing their conservation roles with societal and familial responsibilities will enhance their impact and commitment.

To effectively adapt the ranger program to women's needs while maintaining core responsibilities, SORALO could implement several strategies. These might include offering flexible scheduling to accommodate family duties, leveraging women's community roles for conservation education, and integrating indigenous knowledge into conservation strategies. Leadership development opportunities and family-friendly policies could support women's career growth. Simultaneously, it's crucial to maintain equal standards for all rangers in training, uniforms, patrol responsibilities, performance evaluations, and safety protocols. This balanced approach would recognize women's unique contributions while ensuring all rangers are equipped to fulfil their critical conservation duties.

4.3 - Expanding Educational and Mentorship Opportunities for Women Rangers

The role of women in Maasai society is evolving, with increasing opportunities for education and professional growth. Women rangers have emphasized the importance of adding education and skill-building to conservation programs to reflect these changes. As one respondent noted, “We need to advance our studies,” while another stressed that “Women need the support of more education, especially if they want to carry on in conservation.” However, the demands of ranger work often limit access to further education, with one participant sharing how her goals of becoming a nurse or doctor shifted because her chance to continue schooling was no longer feasible.

To address these challenges, programs like SORALO could provide educational opportunities beyond conservation training. Expanding educational access not only supports women’s personal and professional growth but also cultivates a generation of educated women who can contribute to both conservation and broader societal development. Offering women dedicating time for education will strengthen their ability to perform in ranger roles while advancing gender equity.

Additionally, establishing leadership and mentorship programs can ease women’s transition into ranger roles and provide critical support. The success of Team Lioness highlights how mentorship can help women navigate new responsibilities and excel in conservation efforts. As one respondent succinctly put it, “The world changes, everything else changes.” Conservation programs must evolve alongside these shifts to empower women and benefit Maasai society as a whole.

4.4 - Building Gender-Balanced and Collaborative Ranger Teams

According to our research, it is imperative that there is gender balance on a team. Having mixed teams pushes both men and women rangers to succeed and do their best, and puts

women at ease as they feel safer. This also allows both men and women to learn from each other. If one woman gets pregnant, it doesn’t affect her team as much because with a mixed group, the men are there to fill in so that the loss isn’t felt by a small-all women group. Finding more opportunities for women to move into leadership positions within ranger programs is crucial for promoting gender equality and enhancing conservation efforts. To address the current imbalance in leadership roles, ranger programs should implement several strategies. These include creating clear pathways to leadership through mentorship programs and specialized training, addressing systemic barriers by providing equal access to education and skill-building opportunities, and recognizing the unique contributions women bring to leadership roles. Implementing gender-sensitive policies to support work-life balance and ensuring fair physical fitness requirements are also important steps. As women’s access to education and autonomy continues to grow, ranger programs should proactively create leadership opportunities that leverage the full potential of their female workforce. This approach will not only benefit individual rangers but also enhance the overall effectiveness of conservation efforts.

4.5 – Establishing Opportunities for Women’s Long-Term Growth in Conservation

Based on the aspirations and desires expressed by women rangers, several recommendations can be made to enhance the program’s impact and support women’s career development in conservation. Firstly, creating additional options for women to develop their careers in conservation is crucial. This could involve establishing a formal mentorship program, pairing experienced conservationists with aspiring female rangers to provide guidance and support. Secondly, implementing comprehensive career development skills training, focusing on leadership, wildlife management, and advanced field techniques, would address the women’s expressed desire

for more skills. (do I need to re-quote those desires here?) These initiatives would not only empower women rangers but also prepare them for higher positions within conservation organizations. Additionally, advertising the significant potential for life improvement that the ranger program offers to both the rangers and their families could attract more women to the field and change community perceptions. This outreach could highlight success stories of women rangers who have advanced their careers and improved their family's socioeconomic status through the program.

4.6 – Supporting Women Rangers’ Family and Home Relationships

To address the challenges faced by women rangers in balancing their career and family responsibilities, multiple possible options may be considered. A key recommendation from the data is to increase a woman's availability to return home. One woman said women need “more accessibility to go home.” Additionally, one woman shared her perspective that “married women rangers should be given more leave/time off so they can spend more time at home.” Increased time at home would likely boost family satisfaction with the women's participation in the ranger program. SORALO could consider implementing strategies to actualize this recommendation, subsequently increasing job satisfaction and possibly making the career more palatable to potential applicants.

Another area for improvement is the provision of transportation to and from home. A sister of a ranger said, “women should be given means of transport, if they had motorbikes they could come home everyday.” While this may be financially unattainable, it conveys an important message – transportation should be improved. International key informant, Craig Spencer (executive director and founder of the Black Mambas) supported this sentiment, stating that “work must never be more important than family,” and the ability to travel home is essential. He advised that

SORALO should attempt to strengthen community ties in order to help procure transportation for women. He implied that if women rangers become more integrated with local community members, local community members may become more willing to help provide transportation for women, either through motor vehicles or animal-drawn transportation. This is a possible, cost-effective, solution to improve transportation.

Additionally, many women expressed dissatisfaction with current living conditions. Women desired improved, more private, and safer accommodations. The necessity of this improvement is echoed in the literature (add citation) and also from Craig Spencer, who stated that women “must have a comfortable place to rest.” As SORALO is in the process of building permanent, more suitable housing for women rangers, this represents a step in the right direction.

4.7 - Strengthening Recognition and Skills Training for Women Rangers

SORALO's women rangers have been impressively successful in a wide range of ways, however, women rangers continue to face a variety of gendered challenges. One of the primary challenges women rangers discussed was the lack of community recognition. As emphasized by one women ranger, “it is critical for the community to recognize the role of women.” Women rangers proposed many possible solutions to address this issue. One suggested that “by increasing the number of women rangers the problem could be resolved so there are many together,” another shared that “educating the community to create awareness that women rangers can also help the community,” and another asserted that “it is good to employ more girls so they are able to become more exposed to and aware of the wildlife and conservation.” From these comments, it can be inferred that increased community awareness and an increased volume of women rangers would help counteract and prevent negative community perceptions. This

sentiment is echoed by a local station lead, who shared that “initially the perception of the community towards the female rangers was negative, as many thought the women were not capable, but since they started the community realizes that the women are also actually able to do the job.” These further shows that as community members become more familiar with rangers, they become less sceptical of ranger capability. Other experts suggested similar methods: Craig Spencer shared that the Black Mambas overcame a similar issue by assigning women to consistently patrol only one area, that way women get to know community members and “trust is built.” (The Black Mambas further worked to overcome this issue by establishing community-oriented projects, such as a community garden. Similar initiatives could be considered for SORALO).

Another barrier women frequently discussed is the lack of skills training and career advancement opportunities compared to their male counterparts. Women rangers often lack access to crucial skills, as highlighted by one focus group’s comment: “It’s good to be trained how to fight to defend [themselves]...GPS, driving school. They go out on foot from January to December, because they have no men – they need to learn how to drive a motorbike or car. The program can add the data entry skills”. The many skill gaps highlighted above not only limits women’s ability to perform their duties effectively but also restricts their advancement to leadership positions. As there are less women in leadership positions because there are less women rangers, but also because they lack the skills these positions ask for. To address this, it is crucial to implement comprehensive training programs that provide women rangers with the same skill set as men, ensuring equal opportunities for career growth and operational effectiveness.

5. Discussion

Our research on SORALO’s women ranger program in southern Kenya revealed several

key findings: women rangers balance multiple identities as Maasai women and rangers; the role of women in Maasai society is evolving; success relies on mutual support between men and women rangers; women rangers have significant community impacts and personal aspirations for growth; and they face unique, gendered challenges. Thus, the overarching takeaway from these findings is that women ranger programs must be dynamic and adaptable. As the roles and expectations of women in Maasai society continue to shift (especially considering the rising accessibility of education and new career opportunities) ranger programs need to evolve in tandem. This flexibility is crucial for addressing the changing desires, aspirations, needs, and challenges of women rangers – ensuring the long-term success and relevance of these programs in advancing conservation efforts while also supporting the goals of Maasai women rangers. A potential application of this flexibility can be seen through the frequently requested provision of professional development / capacity building programs. Alternatively, the dynamic nature of a ranger program is essential to best supporting rangers and their dynamic identities – as both Maasai women and as rangers.

6. Conclusion

Our findings highlight the critical role women rangers play in addressing conservation challenges by bringing unique knowledge and perspectives rooted in their roles as caregivers, resource users, and community members. Despite their potential, systemic barriers such as limited educational opportunities and a lack of support structures hinder their ability to fully contribute to conservation efforts. By addressing these gaps, programs can unlock the full potential of women as leaders in conservation, strengthening both environmental outcomes and community resilience.

For SORALO and the broader conservation field, our research underscores the need for dynamic, inclusive programs that integrate

William & Mary 2024

mentorship, leadership training, and educational opportunities for women. A dynamic program is designed with flexibility to adapt to changing needs, helping women carve out their place in conservation without throwing the whole program out.

These steps not only enhance the effectiveness of conservation initiatives but also promote gender equity and community development. Notably, advancing opportunities for women in conservation is not a loss for men. Instead, these findings demonstrate how inclusive ranger programs can expand and strengthen as all voices are heard. When everyone is given a chance to contribute, conservation efforts become more effective, and the entire community benefits.

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank our mentors at the Institute for Integrative Conservation (IIC), Erica Garrouette and Mara Dicenta-Vilker, for their guidance and support, as well as Guy Western, Mercy Waithira, and Pheona Meneto at SORALO for their mentorship and expertise. We are also grateful to Jamie Palumbo, Susan Winslow, T’Noya Thompson, and Lynn Mento at Conservation Nation for their valuable insights and encouragement. This project was made possible through the funding and logistical support of the IIC at William & Mary and Conservation Nation, and the partnership and resources provided by SORALO. Finally, we extend our deepest gratitude to the Maasai community members who generously shared their knowledge and experiences, helping shape the direction and impact of this work.

References

- Danoff-Burg, J. A., & Ocañas, A. (2022). Individual and community-level impacts of the unarmed all-women Black Mamba Anti-Poaching Unit.
- Ondiba, Hesborn Andole, and Kenichi Matsui. "Drivers of Environmental Conservation Activities among Rural Women around the Kakamega Forest, Kenya." *Environment, Development and Sustainability* 23 (2021): 11547-11563.
- Hutter, Michael. 2011. "Infinite Surprises: Value in the Creative Industries." In *The Worth of Goods: Valuation and Pricing in the Economy*, edited by Jens Beckert and Patrick Aspers, 201–20. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Spira, Charles, Andrew Kirkby, Deo Kujirakwinja, and Andrew J. Plumptre. "Understanding Ranger Motivation and Job Satisfaction to Improve Wildlife Protection in Kahuzi-Biega National Park, Eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo." *Oryx* 53, no. 3 (2019): 460-468.
- Belecky, Mike, Rob Parry-Jones, and Rohit Singh. "Insights into Global Ranger Workforce Capacity and Challenges." *Frontiers in Ecology and Evolution* 11 (2023): 1187711.
- Belecky, Mike, Rohit Singh, and Will Moreto. "Occupational Motivation and Intergenerational Linkages of Rangers in Asia." *Oryx* 55, no. 4 (2021): 498-507.
- Woodside, David P., Barney Long, and Anthony M. Starfield. "A Social-Ecological Framework for Improving Wildlife Ranger Performance and Motivation." *Conservation Science and Practice* 3, no. 3 (2021): e202.
- James, R., Fisher et al. Gender bias and inequality holds women back in their conservation careers.
- Seager, J., Bowser, G., & Dutta, A. (2021). Where are the women? Towards gender equality in the ranger workforce.
- Richard L Elligson, Mónica Álvarez Malvido, William D Moreto, Female Rangers in Latin America: An Assessment of Role, Recruitment, and Work Environment.
- Christie, M. E. and Giri, K. (2011). 'Challenges and Experiences of Women in the Forestry Sector in Nepal.'
- IFAW. "Maasai Women Transforming Their Families' Futures." *International Fund for Animal Welfare*. Accessed December 16, 2024.

William & Mary 2024

<https://www.ifaw.org/journal/maasai-women-transforming-their-families-futures>.

CBS News. "Kenya's Maasai Women Defy Gender Norms as Anti-Poaching Rangers in 'Team Lioness.'" *CBS News*. Last modified July 30, 2022. Accessed December 16, 2024. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/kenya-maasai-women-defy-gender-norms-anti-poaching-rangers-team-lioness/>.