

## Men Lead, Women Listen. Or not...?

Are you Kenyan? African? Or “imported” from far away? Male or female? Old (fashioned) or young (at heart)...? Don't worry: This is not one of so many questionnaires we are all used to answer in the corporate context nowadays. This is an awareness-raising little story which, in due course, will show how all these opening questions matter, and it ultimately leads us to this one: *Do you honestly and wholeheartedly believe in the equality of men and women?*

September 2016, with just another of those (real) situations we are all just too familiar with: I am sitting together with seven others in a group work session, as part of a learning activity. All of them adults, all of them well educated Kenyans, so I am the only exception (I am German...). The flow of events starts with the usual preliminaries: *“We need a secretary. Who can be our secretary?”* So far, so perfectly normal – given that we were not only asked to discuss a certain matter but to also produce a result in writing.

But then, this initiative takes on a direction which seems a bit weird – at least to me. Another fellow group member is sure: ***“It should be a woman.”*** That again raises some curiosity in me: *“Why...? A woman?”* Answer, a little puzzled (or rather embarrassed...?): *“Because our chairman is a man.”* Me: *“Who is our chairman?”* –as I am not aware that someone has actually been assigned for that yet. Latest now, everyone looks really confused, but again it is confusion mixed with embarrassment. Then, some of the men point at each other and the one who suggested a woman as secretary is finally confirmed as the “chairman”...

Now this was not a working group tasked with recommendations for safety measures in the logging industry. This was part of a seminar on “Civil Resistance” at the renowned Hekima Institute Nairobi, in which (almost exclusively Kenyan) lecturers and practitioners discussed and learned about effective ways to promote democracy and human rights. You get the point? Or is it only me, as one of those *wazungus* who, possibly driven by some not untypical “cultural colonialism”, has a problem with women principally shortlisted for unrewarding tasks?

Women in Africa, I hear (and so this doesn't seem to apply to Kenya exclusively), still mostly pick up role descriptions at their very birthplace which are considered decisively outdated and outgoing in other parts of this world. And trust me: It is by far not only Western countries propagating principal gender equality rights which, as of today, have already manifested as international standards. Take the example of the Philippines, for instance, where I had worked before coming to Kenya. Of course not all is perfect there, too. But the country has already had a (very inspiring and reformative) female president ages ago. And my former partner organisation there, the largest government department (of Social Welfare and Development) was driven and actually lead by an overwhelming majority of confident, outspoken and at times uncompromising women. Try your luck there proposing it should be “a woman” doing the working group scribbling – and you will learn your lesson fast!

But here I am, in Kenya, and Kenya very often has its irresistible charm too. In situations such as this working group, however, forgive me that I couldn't find it.

How would people's reaction have been, by the way, if the provocative line *“Why a woman?”* had not been asked by a white but, say, a Kenyan man? (And here I am coming back to the questions raised at the beginning.) Or a white... woman? Or a black African woman? Could it really be that (what I have been told) such a rebellious intervention, not very unlikely, would then have been countered with something like *“You would not make a good wife”*?

Let me close by not throwing more rebellious questions around but by answering one that is clearly still open. Who did write the minutes in our working group in the end...? Well, guess what: Out of us three women and five men in that round, it happened to be... a woman.

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### **Addition from Dr. Verena Waldhart, coordinator of GIZ Civil Peace Service programme in Kenya:**

Against this background, I thought it was important to share the following: Since 2016, GIZ CPS supports its partner organization Community Education and Empowerment Centre (CEEC) on 'building the capacity of Murang'a County Assembly Women Aspirants to vie for the 2017 General Elections'. Just the other day I had the opportunity to meet the aspirants and listen to their challenges and the impact of the activity. Accusations of breaking their families, their posters being destroyed by cutting out eyes, mouth, heads, being insulted and chased away, not having the economic power of some male aspirants seemed to be very common. They have however learned to cope with these in a nonviolent way, posters can be replaced, responses are given on facts and insults ignored. There was one statement that came up more than just once: In the Kikuyu culture, if the woman of a homestead is not home, the man will always greet a visitor saying that nobody is at home. The aspirants use it as their slogan, if there are not women in the Government of Kenya, no one is 'at home'.

I was deeply touched and I know that even if this year, they will not win the seats they are vying for, their lives and the lives of men surrounding them have been touched and are transforming.