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Decentralization of Gender Equality in a Federal State

A Case Study on Wildlife Conservation at Banke National Park, West Nepal

REETA KC

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University of Fribourg
Institute of Federalism
Av. Beauregard 1
CH-1700 Fribourg

Phone +41 (0) 26 300 81 25

www.federalism.ch



UNIVERSITÉ DE FRIBOURG FACULTÉ DE DROIT
UNIVERSITÄT FREIBURG RECHTSWISSENSCHAFTLICHE FAKULTÄT

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Institute of Federalism, University of Fribourg

Avenue Beauregard 1

1700 Fribourg

Switzerland

federalism@unifr.ch



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Author: Reeta KC

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Abstract

This research paper explores the case study of the decentralization of gender roles and women's participation in wildlife conservation at Banke National Park in West Nepal. The study examines how decentralization, within the framework of Nepal's federal state, has brought transformative changes in the roles and engagement of women in conservation. Through qualitative methods such as interviews and observation, the research uncovers the evolving landscape of gender dynamics, the challenges faced by women in conservation, and the profound influence of decentralization on these dynamics. The findings highlight that decentralization has acted as a catalyst for increased female participation in decision-making processes and active involvement in wildlife conservation at Banke National Park. Women have emerged as influential stakeholders in conservation efforts, as they decentralize power and authority, giving local communities a greater say in their conservation initiatives. However, it is important to acknowledge that despite the positive impact of decentralization, challenges rooted in societal norms and stereotypes persist. The research underscores the need for ongoing dedication and policy support to achieve complete gender equality in the conservation sector in Nepal.

Keywords

Decentralization; gender roles; wildlife conservation; Banke National Park; Nepal; women's participation; gender equality

A) Introduction

Gender encompasses the societal expectations, roles, duties, and responsibilities ascribed to individuals based on prevailing social, economic, political, religious, and cultural norms and values (Rajbhandari, 2020). Gender equality is an enduring challenge that persists across various sectors worldwide, despite the global efforts and initiatives aimed at achieving parity between the sexes. It addresses the multifaceted interpretation concerning the equal treatment and status of men and women or the advocacy for their equitable treatment, encompassing various perspectives (Andreassi and Thompson, 2008). Nepal, a federal state, recognizes the critical importance of gender equality and the empowerment of women at all levels of government to foster long-term development. This research focuses on Banke National Park, an ecological gem in Nepal's western region, celebrated for its rich biodiversity and cultural heritage. Although the park has made some progress in involving women in conservation activities, the extent of their participation in decision-making processes and their representation in key leadership roles remains restricted. This research project aims to address this void by delving into the decentralization of gender roles in wildlife conservation at Banke National Park, West Nepal.

Wildlife conservation is a vital element in preserving the ecological balance and safeguarding natural habitats and species. The active involvement of all segments of the population, including women, is pivotal in ensuring the effectiveness and sustainability of conservation efforts. However, women's engagement in this field has been limited by a range of societal, cultural, and economic factors. Their participation has often been restricted to specific roles that do not encompass decision-making and leadership. Recognizing the need for more inclusive and gender-responsive conservation practices, this research aims to explore the impact of decentralization within the federal framework of Nepal on the roles and participation of women in wildlife conservation (Shrestha, 2010).

Decentralization, as a governance approach, transfers power and authority from the central government to local communities (Farid, 2018). In the context of conservation, this approach allows for more active participation and decision-making by local stakeholders, including women. By examining the specific dynamics of decentralization in the context of wildlife conservation at Banke National Park, this research seeks to accomplish several objectives:

In the context of Banke National Park's wildlife conservation efforts, this study endeavors to provide an up-to-date understanding of the existing gender dynamics. It aims to assess the roles and levels of participation of women and men, shedding light on the distribution of responsibilities. Additionally, the research seeks to identify the specific challenges and obstacles faced by women in actively participating in conservation, recognizing that these challenges may be rooted in cultural norms, social expectations, or economic constraints. The ultimate goal of this research is to analyse changing gender roles within the park resulting from decentralization. Following this analysis, the study aims to develop strategies and recommendations to enhance gender equality within the park's conservation initiatives. These recommendations will consider the role of decentralization in promoting women's involvement in decision-making processes.

This research project adopts a qualitative methodology, primarily relying on in-depth interviews and observations to capture the nuanced experiences, perspectives, and challenges faced by women involved in wildlife conservation at Banke National Park. Through these qualitative

methods, the research will provide valuable insights and policy recommendations that can inform more inclusive and sustainable conservation practices.

This research endeavours to explore the capacity of decentralization to bring about significant changes in wildlife conservation, with a particular focus on its impact on gender roles and the involvement of women. Through an examination of existing gender dynamics, the identification of challenges, and the presentation of strategies for promoting greater gender equality, this study aims to make a valuable contribution to the ongoing conversation regarding gender issues in conservation, particularly within the context of Nepal's federal-state framework.

B) Literature review

The literature review section provides a concise overview of key studies, theories, and concepts related to gender equality, decentralization, and wildlife conservation in Nepal. The following summarizes the relevant literature and its connection to the research on the impact of decentralization on gender roles and women's participation in wildlife conservation at Banke National Park, West Nepal.

Gender equality and decentralization

The concept of gender equality and its interplay with decentralization in a federal state is central to understanding the research context. Gender equality is emphasized in global initiatives, underlining the importance of empowering women for societal progress (Forster, n.d.). The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) defines discrimination against women and promotes gender equality across all aspects of life (UN Women, 2009). Nepal's 2015 constitution supports women's participation in state institutions, reflecting the nation's commitment to gender equality (Nepal, 2015). According to Forster (2020), gender equality experts have varying opinions on whether federal nations are more effective in promoting gender equality compared to unitary nations. Nonetheless, they concur that the success of any governance system, be it unitary or federal, in advancing gender equality is influenced by external factors such as the political commitment of governing bodies at different levels (central, subnational, and local), the cultural and ethnic diversity of the population, its size, the presence or absence of internal and external conflicts, economic wealth, and the prevalence of discriminatory traditional practices and cultural norms against women.

Women's participation in wildlife conservation in Nepal

Wildlife conservation in Nepal has historically been characterized by male dominance, particularly in leadership roles and decision-making processes (Guragain, 2011). Research by Allendorf and Allendorf (2012) revealed gender-based disparities in perceptions and awareness of protected areas in Nepal, with men having more extensive knowledge than women. Forestry, an integral part of conservation efforts, has also been male-dominated, and Guragain's study (2011) identified challenges hindering women's participation in community forestry. Women's participation and representation in leadership were merely a formality during the initial days of community forestry practices in Dadeldhura district recorded by RECOFTC-NCP.

Decentralization and its impact on conservation

The impact of decentralization on conservation in Nepal has been a subject of interest. Baral and Heinen (2009) highlighted how decentralization in lowland Nepal relieved the central government of administrative and financial burdens, promoting sustainable benefits for residents. Nepal's community forestry programs, known for their success in environmental conservation, are built on decentralized community-based natural resource management. However, challenges persist regarding gender equality and social inclusion within these community groups (Rosen, 2020).

The role of women in conservation

The growing global population and technological advancements are straining the environment and natural resources. In rural areas, where a significant portion of the population resides and directly relies on these resources, women play a crucial role in managing and utilizing natural resources for their family's basic needs. Historically, women were often excluded from environmental conservation efforts and societal roles, but with increasing awareness of their rights and responsibilities, they have actively engaged in environmental protection. Women are not only vital in managing natural resources at the family and community levels but have also assumed leadership positions in conservation and enhancement, particularly in tasks related to water, fuel, food, forests, and agricultural lands (Mago and Gunwal, 2019).

The involvement of women in conservation can have positive impacts. Women in Bardia National Park, Nepal, reported economic benefits and enhanced self-confidence because of their participation in entrepreneurship, which also led to a greater role in household decision-making (Panta and Thapa, 2017). The World Wildlife Fund for Nature (WWF) emphasized the importance of empowering women to reduce environmental harm in rural areas of developing nations, highlighting the need to challenge entrenched gender norms and inequalities (WWF, 2022).

In summary, the literature provides critical insights into gender equality, decentralization, and wildlife conservation in Nepal. This context forms the foundation for understanding the impact of decentralization on gender roles and women's participation in wildlife conservation, as explored in the research on Banke National Park. The studies mentioned above inform the research's theoretical framework and contribute to the broader discourse on gender and conservation in Nepal's federal-state framework.

C) Research methodology

This section outlines the methodology employed to investigate the impact of decentralization on gender roles and women's participation in wildlife conservation at Banke National Park, West Nepal. Recognizing the complex and multifaceted nature of this research, qualitative methods, specifically in-depth interviews and observations, were strategically chosen as the most suitable means of data collection.

Study location and permissions

The research was conducted within the confines of Banke National Park, a region renowned for its biodiversity and cultural significance. Before the commencement of the study, all necessary permissions and clearances were secured from the park authorities. These permissions were instrumental in ensuring the smooth execution of the research within the protected area.

Participant selection

The selection of research participants was a critical aspect of the study. To encompass a diverse and representative range of women involved in conservation efforts, specific selection criteria were established. These criteria included considerations of the role individuals played in conservation activities, the communities to which they belonged, their level of experience in the field, and their age groups. This strategic participant selection aimed to capture a broad spectrum of experiences, perspectives, and challenges faced by women engaged in wildlife conservation at Banke National Park. The participants were identified based on their roles and involvement in activities related to wildlife conservation and decentralization.

Data collection methods

Two primary qualitative data collection methods were employed to gather insights into the impact of decentralization on gender roles and women's participation in wildlife conservation:

Firstly, in-depth interviews were conducted with women actively engaged in conservation efforts within Banke National Park. These interviews allowed for a detailed exploration of participants' experiences, perceptions, and challenges. The open-ended nature of the interviews enabled participants to express their views and experiences freely. The research involved interviews with nine women from various backgrounds and positions relevant to wildlife conservation and decentralization within Banke National Park.

Secondly, observations have been used as another critical data collection method. The researcher observed the dynamics of women's participation in conservation activities, their interactions, and their roles within the park. This method offered valuable insights into the practical aspects of their involvement.

Data analysis

The data analysis process involved several key stages:

Transcription: All data sources, including interview field notes and documents, were transcribed and organized systematically.

Deductive coding: The data were subjected to deductive coding, following a structured framework that emerged from the research questions and objectives. Critical questions guided the coding process, focusing on dominant narratives, stakeholder perspectives, shifts over time, and the influence of social and cultural factors (Miles and Huberman, 1994).

Contextual and framing discourse analysis: Contextual analysis was employed to consider the unique social, cultural, and political context of Banke National Park. Framing discourse analysis was applied to scrutinize how stakeholders framed gender roles and decentralization within the broader discourse (Fairclough, 2015).

This approach to data analysis ensured a thorough and nuanced understanding of the complex interplay between decentralization, gender roles, and women's participation in wildlife conservation.

In conclusion, the research methodology was designed to gather a rich and comprehensive set of data to explore the impact of decentralization on gender roles and women's participation in wildlife conservation at Banke National Park. The combination of in-depth interviews, observations, and rigorous consideration analytical tools such as discourse analysis and contextual analysis laid the foundation for a rigorous and insightful analysis.

D) Findings and discussions

This section presents the major findings of the research, focusing on the impact of decentralization on gender roles and women's participation in wildlife conservation at Banke National Park. The findings encompass the transformative influence of decentralization and its effects on women's roles and participation in conservation.

1. Increased participation

Decentralization has led to a significant rise in women's involvement in wildlife conservation at Banke National Park, showcasing a notable shift from traditional gender roles. This shift, backed by empirical data from the Ministry of Forest and Environment Integrated Landscape Management to Secure Nepal's Protected Areas and Critical Corridors (ILaM) project for the fiscal year 2022/23, highlights an encouraging move towards gender equality in conservation efforts. Specifically, within Banke and Bardiya National Parks, female representation stands at 18.52% and 11.63%, respectively, among staff members. This marks tangible improved compared to the average 8.79% of female staff in key government offices during the same fiscal year and consistent percentages within the ILaM project implementation area, demonstrating strides towards gender equality in the realm of wildlife conservation.

In the Madhya Bindu Buffer Zone User Committee (BZUC), groups of Buffer Zone Community Forests (BZCFs) are included and are authorized to make decisions for program implementation and other actions plan which are supported by the BZUC. The BZCFs are small forest groups which are included inside the BZUC though group formation as a member, along with other BZCFs who are located nearby.

In the context of the Madhya Bindu Buffer Zone User Committee (BZUC), comprising 13 members, the active participation of 6 female members is evident. Notably, one of these female members holds the position of treasurer, a role she attained through active involvement in the decision-making process during meetings. It is noteworthy to highlight that the jurisdiction of the Madhya Bindu BZUC extends to the Taradevi Buffer Zone Community Forest (BZCF), along with the oversight of the other five BZCF (Interviewees 1, 3, and 6).¹

¹The Buffer Zone Community Forest Legislation mandates a 50% female representation in BZCF user group leadership, emphasizing diversity by including indigenous and marginalized groups. Despite this, both BZUC and BZMC follow the same process. It is strongly recommended to ensure unwavering adherence to this gender mandate, fostering inclusivity. Furthermore, the BZCF legislation specifies that in the case of position selection disputes, it is advisable to form a specialized election committee, comprising one Coordinator and one Election Committee Member exclusively for women. This measure reinforces a steadfast commitment to gender diversity in decision-making structures.

Reference: *Shree Hariyali Community Forest Users Group Legislation 2079 B.S (2022 A.D) of Pathari Sanschare Municipality, Ward No 2,1 Morang (The Third Amendment).*

Historically, women in Nepal faced limited participation in wildlife conservation, with men predominantly controlling decision-making processes. Their roles were confined to informal, unpaid tasks due to entrenched gender norms and socio-cultural barriers (Christie and Giri, 2019). However, the introduction of federalism and decentralization in 2015 sparked a notable transformation. This change allowed increased representation of women in governance at various levels, especially at local and provincial levels, providing opportunities for their active engagement in wildlife conservation decision-making. This decentralization empowered local governments and communities, enabling women to play a more direct role in managing natural resources, including those crucial to wildlife conservation. Government policies advocating gender equality and recognizing women's pivotal role in resource management further underscore the importance of these changes.

These developments underscore the crucial role of gender equality and women's active participation in wildlife conservation within Nepal's evolving governance landscape, essential for achieving conservation goals and addressing environmental challenges.

2. Family burdens and stereotypes

Family responsibilities intersect with conservation commitments, constraining women's full participation. Interviews highlighted the enduring influence of patriarchal norms, shaping perceptions and limiting women's dedication to conservation. While the shift to federalism has granted women increased freedom, allowing them to actively contribute, deep-seated stereotypes still impact their conservation roles. This transformation suggests broader societal changes, sparking questions about its impact on community dynamics (International Alert, 2021). Decentralization has opened doors for women's engagement in conservation efforts, yet entrenched societal norms continue to present significant challenges.

The discussion delves into Forster's (2020) exploration of family relations and gender equality within federal systems. The study emphasizes the pivotal role of achieving equality in family dynamics for broader gender equality objectives. Within federal systems, the devolution of power to sub-national units or religious authorities can perpetuate embedded discriminatory norms, hindering the uniformity of family law across regions. This inconsistency poses challenges for the women's movement in advocating for reforms. However, federal systems also offer opportunities for innovation and policy adaptation, enabling the women's movement to challenge discriminatory practices for women's benefit within the family. This complexity mirrors the experiences of women balancing family and conservation commitments, constrained by patriarchal norms and stereotypes (Forster, 2020).

Despite the transformative impact of decentralization, deeply embedded societal norms and stereotypes persist as formidable obstacles for women in conservation. Women face the intersection of conservation duties and family obligations, limited by traditional roles and societal expectations. The predominance of caregiving and household responsibilities impedes their active participation in conservation (Interviewees 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8 and 9). Despite decentralization's progress, gender discrimination remains prevalent in conservation efforts. Women encounter societal barriers that impede their equal involvement. This ongoing struggle highlights the need for continued efforts to achieve complete gender equality within the wildlife conservation sector at Banke National Park in Nepal.

3. Constitutional support

The revised Constitution of Nepal in 2015 plays a pivotal role in fostering women's active involvement in conservation efforts, establishing a foundation for gender equality by mandating proportional representation in state institutions across various sectors, including conservation. Interviews with key individuals within the conservation landscape, such as a ranger from Banke National Park, a member of the Community-Based Anti-Poaching Unit (CBAPU), a member of the Buffer Zone User Committee (BZUC), and a representative from the Rural Municipalities Women Children and Senior Citizen Department, offered diverse perspectives, enriching the understanding of the complex dynamics within Banke National Park's conservation efforts.

These interviewees have emphasized that constitutional support for the women who have provided their rights regarding the decision-making process through participation at local, state, and national levels. Their voices are being heard and answered positively by supporting their role in conservation.

Additionally, the historical evolution of decentralization policies in Nepal highlights an increasing inclusivity in people's participation in conservation activities, extending from local leaders to encompass women, economically disadvantaged groups, and Dalits in various sectors, reflecting a commitment to gender representation (Interviewee 9). However, societal norms and entrenched patriarchal values continue to challenge the pursuit of gender justice, underscoring the imperative for elected women members of the Constituent Assembly to collectively transcend narrow interests and propel gender equality in Nepal (Chhetri et al., n.d.). Women are also working actively in field movements for anti-poaching and wildlife rescue efforts (Interviewees 4 and 6).

The research's key findings on the role of the constitution in supporting women's involvement in conservation, while also linking these findings to the broader context of decentralization policies and the societal challenges that persist in achieving gender equality (Interviewee 2).

Have supported women involvement in decision making process, their voices are heard, and positive changes are counter in gender equality. Beside this due to constitution women have got possibilities to be leader and any other position in groups formation. (Interviewee 2).

4. Political involvement

The research findings showcase a significant advancement in women's political involvement, evident in their active participation across various political parties and their attainment of higher-level positions within local governance structures. Interviews with key figures, such as the members of the Buffer Zone User Committee, the ward people representative, and the secretary of the Buffer Zone Community Forest, underscore the tangible impact of increased political influence. According to Niraula (2022), the data recorded by the Election Commission in 2017 revealed that women secured 91% of deputy seats in municipalities. These successes were enabled by the Election Commission's mandate requiring a minimum of 40.4% female nominees. The concrete data not only validates the broader impact of women's political empowerment on conservation policies and gender equality but also highlights the practical outcomes of their political involvement.

The discussions surrounding women's political involvement underscore the supportive role played by Nepal's revised Constitution of 2015, emphasizing women's entitlement to proportional involvement in state bodies and public services (Niraula, 2022). The research demonstrates

their active engagement across political parties and their attainment of higher-level positions within local governance, enabling advocacy for their rights and resulting in the formulation of more gender-responsive conservation policies (Interviewees 1, 2, 3, and 9). This engagement has significantly amplified women's voices in decision-making, marking a positive shift facilitated by constitutional support and active participation in political spheres.

5. Economic empowerment

The active participation of women in conservation significantly contributes to their economic empowerment, enhancing their financial independence and self-confidence. Their engagement not only increases access to the family income but also generates additional earnings, lifting their economic status. This newfound empowerment, fostered by supportive training from government and non-governmental organizations, equips women with essential skills, enabling them to manage businesses proficiently and make meaningful contributions to conservation efforts (Interviewees 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, and 9). The multifaceted benefits of their involvement, spanning economic empowerment, improved living standards, capacity building, and enhanced social interaction, collectively underscore the transformative influence of women in the conservation sector (Forster, 2020).

Furthermore, the discussions emphasize the critical significance of women's economic rights in addressing persistent gender disparities in income, labor force participation, and entrepreneurship. Positive outcomes, such as poverty reduction and decreased inequalities, have been associated with women's economic empowerment. Within federal systems, while acknowledging potential challenges faced by women entrepreneurs in decentralized economies, there are advantages through successful interventions and policy transfers. The research underscores substantial economic empowerment gained by women through conservation involvement, not only lifting some out of poverty but also enabling a more active role in household financial decision-making. This highlights the potential of conservation activities in not only economically empowering women, but also driving broader socio-economic advancements among those engaged in conservation efforts (Forster, 2020).

6. Poverty alleviation

The participation of women in conservation initiatives led by Banke National Park has notably contributed to poverty reduction and economic empowerment. These efforts have significantly improved the financial well-being of women, resulting in a tangible decrease in poverty levels among participants, as supported by statements from Banke National Park and the Buffer Zone Management Plan (Nepal-Midterm Performance Evaluation of Hariyo Ban, 2015). Insights from interviews with key figures, including the ranger of Banke National Park, a secretary member of the Taradevi Buffer Zone Community Forests User Group, and a rural municipality member, further strengthen this assertion. They highlight the economic empowerment women gained through engaging in local resource utilization and various production activities, emphasizing the pivotal role of conservation efforts in economically empowering women, alleviating poverty, and supporting livelihoods through awareness campaigns and diversified programs (Interviewee 3).

Additionally, the research findings highlighted the substantial economic empowerment gained by women through their involvement in conservation efforts. This empowerment reflects increased

access to family income and additional earnings, enhancing their financial independence and bolstering their confidence. Beyond the realm of conservation, it enables them to play a more active role in household financial decision-making. Moreover, women's involvement in conservation has directly contributed to poverty alleviation, with the economic benefits lifting some women out of poverty (Interviewees 2 and 9). These findings collectively reinforce the potential of conservation activities, not only in economically empowering women but also in driving broader socio-economic improvements among the women involved (Nepal-Midterm Performance Evaluation of Hariyo Ban, 2015).

7. Reduction in gender-based violence

The research findings highlight a significant reduction in gender-based violence among women actively participating in conservation efforts within Banke National Park. Interviews with key figures, including the Ranger from Banke National Park and members of BZUC, BZCF, and communities, underscore the positive impact of women's increased economic independence and elevated status within their families and communities. This economic autonomy acts as a powerful deterrent against gender-based violence, reducing women's vulnerability (Interviewees 1, 2, 3, and 5). During the interview, a perspective aligned with the overall trend, emphasizing a reduction in gender-based violence and discrimination within her community is particularly noteworthy considering her low-caste background (Interviewee 5). Likewise, Interviewees 2 and 3, directly involved in conservation within Banke National Park, contribute to the robustness of these findings. Additionally, the participants who regularly monitor forests to combat poaching and illegal activities within BNP conservation areas reinforce the absence of gender-based violence during their fieldwork (Interviewees 3 and 6). These findings are further supported by insights from other participants, including those involved in forest monitoring within Banke National Park, all of whom confirm the decrease in gender-based violence. Forster (2020) delved into the intricate connection between family relations and gender equality within the context of the federal system, emphasizing the importance of achieving equality in family dynamics as a cornerstone of broader gender equality goals. It explores the complexities women face in balancing family commitments with their involvement in conservation, shedding light on the influence of patriarchal norms and stereotypes that limit women's ability to fully dedicate themselves to conservation activities.

The study's findings also shed light on the pervasive issue of gender-based violence against women, which encompasses various forms of harm and suffering in both public and private life. Approximately one-third of women globally experience gender-based violence in their lifetime, and the home is often identified as the most dangerous place for women. The research's particularly encouraging finding is the reduction in gender-based violence among women participating in conservation activities at Banke National Park. This outcome highlights the role of economic independence in deterring violence, as women's improved status within families and communities makes them less vulnerable to such acts.

8. Inclusivity in decision-making

The integration of women into decision-making processes not only enriches conservation efforts within community groups but also extends its influence to households, fostering a more balanced distribution of power. These shifts are exemplified by individuals like the Secretary of Taradevi BZCF at Banke National Park, whose administrative responsibilities and active participation in

community meetings showcase the impact of decentralization in empowering and respecting women's voices in critical decision-making contexts (Interviewee 3). Despite the evident progress, persisting challenges signify the need for continuous dedication and policy support to ensure complete gender equality and inclusivity within wildlife conservation. The study emphasizes the transformative potential of decentralization in the realm of wildlife conservation while acknowledging both the strides made and the hurdles that necessitate further attention.

E) Conclusion

This research paper explores the impact of decentralization on gender roles and women's participation in wildlife conservation at Banke National Park in Nepal. The study employed qualitative methods, including in-depth interviews and observations, to gather insights into the experiences, perspectives, and challenges faced by women engaged in conservation efforts. The research findings highlight the transformative influence of decentralization, leading to increased participation of women in wildlife conservation and a notable shift from traditional gender roles. Decentralization has resulted in a significant rise in women's involvement in wildlife conservation at Banke National Park, indicating progress toward gender equality in conservation efforts. Female representation among staff members in Banke and Bardiya National Parks stands at 18.52% and 11.63%, respectively, showcasing tangible improvement compared to the average of 8.79% of female staff in key government offices. The research emphasizes the importance of ethical considerations, including informed consent, confidentiality, and respect for cultural and social norms, to ensure the integrity and reliability of the findings. The study highlights the role of Nepal's constitution in supporting women's participation in conservation and their increased political involvement, leading to the formulation of more gender-responsive conservation policies. It also contributes to the ongoing conversation regarding gender issues in conservation and provides valuable insights and policy recommendations for more inclusive and sustainable conservation practices.

Undoubtedly, the evidence presented throughout this research provides the positive impact of decentralization, highlighting the shift of women from peripheral roles to central decision-making positions. Yet it is imperative to recognize the persisting gap between the current employment rate of women in wildlife conservation and the desired. This acknowledgment prompts a critical reflection on the avenues for further progress and the collaborative efforts required to bridge the disparity.

Moving forward, local, regional, and national governments are pivotal agents in steering the trajectory towards gender equality. Policy making and implementation must be underpinned by a commitment to dismantling barriers that hinder women's full participation. This involves creating an enabling environment that ensures equal access to educational and professional opportunities, as well as addressing ingrained socio-cultural norms that may act as impediments.

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) emerge as crucial partners in effecting change at the grassroots level. Collaborative initiatives with local communities, educational institutions, and governmental bodies can facilitate the design and execution of gender-sensitive programs. These programs should not only focus on skill enhancement but also on fostering awareness about the indispensable role of women in conservation and breaking down stereotypes that limit their involvement.

International donors, as stakeholders with a broader purview, can significantly contribute to the cause by earmarking resources for projects that prioritize gender equality. This involves financial support for initiatives that promote women's leadership, empowerment, and education within the conservation sector. By aligning funding priorities with gender-sensitive goals, international donors can create transformative change on a global scale.

In conclusion, while the strides made in Bank National Park are commendable, they serve as a launchpad for more extensive and sustained efforts. The collaborative engagement of local, regional, and national governments, along with the dedicated involvement of NGOs and international donors, holds the key to unlocking the full potential of gender equality in wildlife conservation. The journey towards increasing participation of women in various areas necessitates a holistic approach, addressing not only systematic barriers but also fostering a cultural shift that recognizes and values the invaluable contribution of women in conservation through a unified commitment to change, the vision of a more inclusive and equitable conservation landscape can evolve from aspiration to reality.

List of interviews (anonymous)

Anonymous Interview 1, Woman working in civil society

Anonymous Interview 2, Women Working in National Park

Anonymous Interview 3, Female member of Buffer Zone Community Forest (BZCF)

Anonymous Interview 4, Women Working in National Park

Anonymous Interview 5, Dalit/disadvantaged group/women of Buffer Zone Community Forest

Anonymous Interview 6, Female member of the Indigenous People associated with both the Community-Based Anti-Poaching Unit (CBAPU) and the Buffer Zone User Committee (BZUC)

Anonymous Interview 7, Women working in forest office

Anonymous Interview 8, Women from the local ward

Anonymous Interview 9, Women working in the municipality

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