

## Women and Woods: Reclaiming Equality in Resource Governance

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**Abstract:** The paper explores the intersectionalities of conflict in natural resource governance between the state authorities, indigenous Tharu and Sonaha people in general and women in particular in the buffer zone (BZ) of the Bardia National Park (BNP). Drawing upon the experiences of two buffer zone user groups at BNP's BZs, this paper argues that the gendered nature of protected area (PA) management and governance affects the Tharu and Sonaha women and aggravates their exposure to multiple vulnerabilities posed by park policies and authorities. The paper also demonstrates that the genuine participation of Tharu and Sonaha women in the management structures of BZ is limited; and attempts to contribute in the gender dimensions of (PA) management and governance.

**Key words:** Bardiya National Park, buffer zone, participation, protected area governance, women

### INTRODUCTION

There are diverse and extensive body of scholarly works addressing the issues around Protected Area (PA) and its resource governance. Research and available literature confirm that there is a need for considerable participation of local people in the governance of forest and its resources (Tyagi 2006; Ojha *et al.* 2010; Ojha 2008, 2009). Several studies also highlight issues of conflict in conservation and governance of natural resources (e.g., Brockington and Schmidt-Soltau 2004; McShane 2003; Jana 2007; Cernea and Schmidt-Soltau 2003; Paudel *et al.* 2007a; Paudel *et al.* 2007b); and, unequal power relations between the local people and the conservation authority in the people-oriented approach of conservation (e.g., Paudel *et al.* 2011; Heinen and Mehta 2000; Jana 2008). There are scholarly contributions that analyse the gender aspects of resource conservation (Rocheleau *et al.* 2013; Lama and Buchy 2002; Agarwal 1997, 2007, 2009; Shiva 1988; Nightingale 2011).

Sharing of authority, responsibilities and accountability among and between the stakeholders through a participatory process are entailed in governance of natural resources (Borrini-Feyerabend *et al.* 2004). According to Ribot (2002: 1-2), decentralization includes both transfer of power and accountable representation, which is believed to be the mechanism of acquiring greater equity and efficiency. For Borrini-Feyerabend *et al.* (2013), the PA governance is a flexible process than a set of fixed affairs because governance structures can be different under different social and ecological contexts.

Despite plethora of literature on the governance of forestry in the Nepalese context (see Ojha *et al.* 2010; Ojha 2008, 2009), studies concerning the gender dimension of PA governance and management are limited (see Allendorf and Allendorf 2012; Gurung *et al.* 2008). This paper hence attempts to fill this empirical gap. Taking decentralization of power and

authority of the local people as the key principle of governance, the paper sheds light on the participation of Tharu and Sonaha women in the management of PA. By examining women's participation in the buffer zone users groups (BZUGs), this paper explores the realm of participatory conservation and governance of PA buffer zone (BZ) from a gender perspective.

The paper focuses on two key questions - first, what are the vulnerabilities of the indigenous women who are forest dependent and living in BZ areas in relation to the park regime? Second, what is the nature of participation of local Tharu and Sonaha women in the local institutions of the PA BZ management?

Empirical data for this paper were collected through fieldwork at Pathabar and Gola Village Development Committees (VDCs) located in the BZ of Bardia National Park (BNP) in September 2012. Interviews and focus group discussions were organised with general and executive committee members of Birsana BZUG at Pathabar VDC and Shantipur BZUG at Gola VDC. Rajipur village has two sections- North and South; the Birsana BZUG's executive committee comprises of Sonaha and Tharu members belonging to both these sections. Interviews were also carried out with BNP staffs and security personnel. Birsana is a women only BZUG whilst Shantipur BZUG is a mixed one.

## STRUCTURE OF PA INSTITUTIONS IN BZs OF BNP

Buffer Zones are 'areas adjacent to protected areas, on which land use is partially restricted to give an added layer of protection to the protected area itself while providing valued benefits

to neighbouring rural communities' (Mackinnon *et al.* 1986: 90). The BZ of BNP covers 327 sq. km. area surrounding the park.

It is important to first discuss about the general formation of the local institutions such as BZUGs and their committees known as buffer zone users committee (BZUC) and buffer zone management committee (BZMC). It can be said that the mechanism of this very structure (see figure 1) works as a system to sustain and manage the PAs in Nepal. Therefore, these are essential institutions that play a crucial role in resource governance and management.

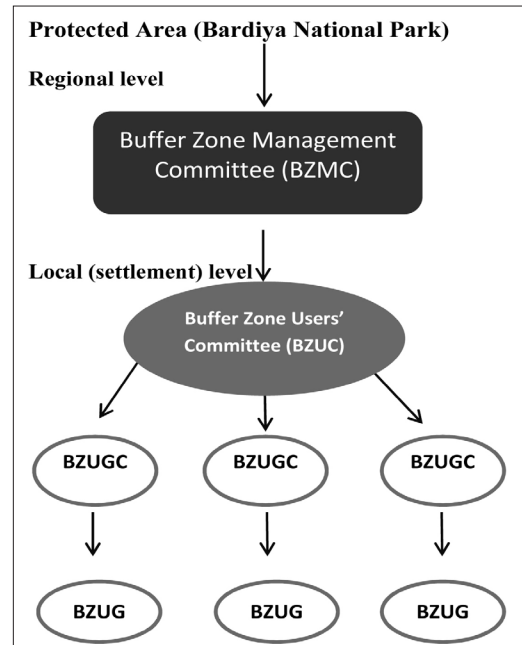


Figure 1: Structure of PA Buffer Zone Management

Source: Author's field visit and personal interview with the PA officials in BNP.

BZUG is the smallest unit of the PA institution consisting of at least 25-30 households<sup>1</sup>. There could be women,

<sup>1</sup> Could include more or less depending on the size of a ward or settlement.

men and/or mixed groups depending on necessity. BZUGs have their own executive committees- for convenience recognized here as buffer zone users groups committee (BZUGC comprising of one chairperson, one vice-chairperson and one secretary. In men's and mixed groups, it is mandatory for these executive committees to have at least one woman member. The entire population residing in the settlement are the members of such BZUGs.

From amongst the chairperson, vice chairperson or secretary of each BZUGC, two members are nominated to form a BZUC. In a BZUC, there are one chairperson, one vice-chairperson, one secretary, one treasurer and at least five members. As per the Interim Constitution of Nepal (2007), 33 per cent participation of women is mandatory in any executive bodies.

The BZMC is the apex decision-making body for BZ management. The chairpersons of each BZUCs are represented in the BZMC as ex-officio members. It comprises of one chairperson, one vice-chairperson, one secretary, one treasurer and at least five members. In addition, it also has the Chief Warden of the PA as member secretary and representatives from the District Development Committee (DDC) of the respective district are also included. The BZMC is responsible for taking major decisions regarding the management, conservation of natural resources, and welfare and development of communities located within the BZ.

## **WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION: RHETORIC OR REALITY?**

This section attempts to establish participation - especially of the local

women and those living along the fringes of BNP - as a key aspect of the park's resource governance. It has been proven through various researches (Shiva 1988; Agarwal 1992, 1997, 2007, 2009; Nightingale 2002, 2006; Rocheleau 1992) that rural women have been involved in natural resource governance and management in the developing world. The vast array of literature (McDermott and Schreckenber 2009; Adhikari 2005; Agarwal 2001; Lama and Buchy 2002) present a scenario of the asymmetric socio-economic and political equity, and participation of women in key decision-making processes.

During the study, it was found that there were absolutely no women in the BZUCs or BZMC. Women participation was only observed in BZUGCs alone, where neither their participation counted nor did they make any decisions. Since the chairpersons of each BZUC's are the ex-officio members of the BZMC, no women from the BZUGCs were included in the BZMC. This can be attributed to the fact that there was no women chairpersons in any of the BZUCs. This suggests that women are completely excluded from key decision making roles in BZ management. A senior PA official also confirmed this and said,

*There was a Dalit woman in the BZMC three years back, but there is none at present. She was from Chepang-7, Beluwa VDC. However, she had to travel long hours for regular meetings for which she had to manage her time accordingly as a result of which she resigned after working for just 4 months. (Interview, October 2012)*

It is important to note that women were participating in different BZUGC's. However, only few women were at

the decision-making positions such as chairperson in women's group. Women's group featured women in decision-making positions; however, in mixed groups, women were merely 'assembled' as members to fulfil the mandatory requirement of users groups. None of the local women who had been interviewed for the purpose of this study were aware about any major decisions, events or facts about women's general participation. They even lacked information about the mandatory 33 per cent participation of women. Only a handful of Sonaha women were involved in the Birsana BZUC of Pathabar VDC.

Women, in general, had a very low level of participation in the meetings. According to one woman participant, women often did not speak and had no or limited knowledge on the issues being discussed. They also tended to agree on whatever decisions were made. Some female members also said that they were not aware of the meetings and some expressed they only went to meetings that were mandatory. A woman also claimed that she had never attended any such meetings, which was the case with many women like her in the Sonaha community of Rajipur village. Even those women who were holding important positions in their respective BZUGCs had no or little information. These women were in the committee because of the mandatory rule to include them in women's groups and all they did was appear during the meetings and that too only if their time allowed it.

Comparatively, Tharu women were found to have greater participation than Sonaha women in the executive committee of Birsana Women's BZUG (Community Forest) of Rajipur village, Pathabar VDC. This BZUG has only two Sonaha women

in its 13 member executive committee. One was the Vice-President and another was a member. Although majority of the residents are Sonahas in Rajipur village (which includes Sonahas of both North and South Rajipur), the President in the Birsana BZUG was a Tharu woman. There are layers of socio-economic and political dynamics between Tharu and Sonaha community within the two villages studied, which is beyond the scope of this paper and hence will not be discussed here.

These outcomes show that, while the participation of women at the BZMC is non-existent, there is limited participation even at the local level (in BZUC, for example). Although women participation in local BZUC and BZUGCs existed, they were not involved in any key positions hence making it impossible for them to represent themselves in the BZMC. The fact that no woman is in the decision-making position at the BZUCs in the two VDCs suggests non-compliance of the mandatory provision of 33 per cent representation. Taking few women as members and that too for the sake of headcount, cannot be regarded as genuine participation. In situations where even the legally allocated women's minimal participation quota was not maintained, representation of Tharu or Sonaha women in decision-making roles was out of question. This lack of women's participation then had further implications on their situations in relation to the park authority.

## **WHAT LED TO WEAK PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN?**

One of the reasons for low participation of women was due to the fact that they felt morally dominated and less confident amid their male counterparts because their

voices, which only few women managed to raise, were constantly ignored and not fully appreciated. A Pahadi<sup>2</sup> woman from Gola VDC said that it was not worth being active in such committees as their voices and views were often not valued and ignored. A Sonaha couple agreed that women are often ignored and their ideas are less appreciated,

*Women members' voices are rarely heard. Other members often think that they don't have the capacity to understand and probe into the matter and therefore have no proper solution to the problems or issues. Women are usually provided different trainings based on their choices such as tailoring or beautician- if any programme at all is conducted for the welfare of women. (Interview, October 2012)*

Tharu women in Gola VDC also expressed similar experiences that hinted at the devaluation of ideas and opinions of women members. An official at BNP said,

*Patriarchy prevails in our society and the rural women are often uneducated, having sole responsibilities of raising children and carrying out household chores. Most of the communities are under the poverty line and don't have any interest in any participation; all they think about is the sustenance of their daily livelihoods. Besides, women are also not motivated because their involvement in committees has no financial benefits for themselves. It would have been logical and sensible to them, had it brought any monetary benefits. (Interview, October 2012)*

Women's participation in actual decision-making process was dubious at the ward

level as well, owing to the fact that their physical presence and proportional representation didn't guarantee any influence in the decision making process. Both men and women respondents said that women were not regularly active and only a few of them spoke during meeting. Their participation itself was found to be minimal even where they held substantial positions within executive committees. This clearly reflected that women participation was a mere symbolic gesture with no real attempt towards their qualitative participation.

Sonaha women from Rajipur, ward number 4 suggested that the reason for not attending most of those meetings was due to the lack of time, information and interest. As most of the Sonaha women were more interested in income generating tasks such as gold panning and fishing, it was natural for them not to attend any BZ related meetings. Tharu women in Gola VDC too said that they did not often attend meetings because of their lack of time due to household chores. When asked if they knew anything about the users' committees/groups or BZMC, one of the Sonaha woman replied, "We have heard about the users' committees/groups from our husbands". Another woman expressed, "We are so captured by our daily routines and household chores that we don't even have time to think about anything else even if we wanted to." Many women said that they didn't know about the committees and groups because no one told them about it. Most of the Sonaha men, however, were aware about the committees.

Many Sonaha women were of the opinion that even if they attended meetings when they had the time to, they didn't really

<sup>2</sup> A term used to denote people from hill of mountain in Nepal.

care about their rights and responsibilities outside the family domain because at the end of the day, those meetings would not relieve them of their household chores. Some attributed low confidence levels and lack of knowledge to speak openly for not attending any meetings. In many cases, the meeting time and schedules were also not women-friendly which caused women to withdraw from such meetings. As previously mentioned, a PA official said that a Dalit woman was in BZMC three years ago but resigned due to the frequent long-hour travels she had to make from her home town for the meetings. If the committee had considered her problems while formulating plans for such meetings or had they provided any financial or non-financial benefits, perhaps she would have stayed.

Analysing the responses of both Tharu and Sonaha men and women as well as some others (few selected Pahadi, Brahmin and Chhetry women participants), it can be concluded that reasons behind low participation of women was due to their lack of time and interest, along with absence of any suitable encouragement (such as monetary incentives or other benefits) for participation. It holds true, particularly in the case of Sonaha women, who work hard regardless of the season by digging sandy bays of rivers for tiny particles of gold. Why would they go and attend meetings, leave their occupation, or even miss out on any chance of rare leisure time they get after a long and tiresome day of household chores? Apart from this, these rural women are generally ill-informed about the meetings, or not informed at all about the institution's processes which then ultimately leads to their disinterest and indifference towards any such affairs. Finally, even if they do

show courage to participate or speak, they are either not encouraged or their ideas are simply ignored. This discourages them from any participation as is the case with many women interviewed.

Apart from these, the Tharu and Sonaha women are also not encouraged by the PA policies to take part in the decision making process as seen at both the VDCs studied. There is no provision for women as such in the Buffer Zone Management Regulation (1996) (Chapagain 1996). Although 33 per cent women's participation is enshrined in the Interim Constitution of Nepal (2007), this does not necessarily hold true in its implementation. No mechanism exists to properly monitor or follow up on these implementations at the ground. Local women's symbolic representation in the executive committees of BZUGs is a typical example of a loophole inherent in the BZ management policy that not only breeds inequality but actually helps in promoting local women's vulnerabilities to park authority. In case of the Buffer Zone Management Regulation (1996), it doesn't even pay lip-service to women's 33 per cent participation and assumes that the 'local people/users' (see Chapagain 1996: 1-14) involves women by default.

### **LOCAL WOMEN RENDERED VICTIMS IN THE CONFLICT BETWEEN LOCAL PEOPLE, PARK AUTHORITY AND SECURITY PERSONNEL**

There is a triangular relationship between PA governance policies; conduct of PA authorities and security personnel toward the locals; and women's vulnerability to different levels of violence. This section will try to shed some light on how the PA governance policies have adversely affected

the local Sonaha and Tharu people and how the conflict between these two has further worsened multiple vulnerabilities of women. According to the Tharu and Sonaha respondents, there are several challenges, such as sustenance of livelihood and access to natural resources, of those living in the BZ of BNP. Parvati, a Sonaha woman from Pathabar VDC complained,

*Although we need PA forests to survive, we are not allowed to enter. We have been managing till date by just going to the BZ areas, where there are not enough resources, forest and water, to fulfil our needs. We sometimes enter the PA premises secretly and access the resources. (Interviewed October 2012)*

The situation for Tharu people from Gola VDC was even worse, as they reported that they were not even allowed to enter the BZ. The park area is open only for three to seven days every year with condition of collecting only *Khar Khadai* (a type of thatch grass), fuel woods and other minor resources. Motilal from Gola VDC expressed his discontent,

*We are not even allowed to enter the community forest which falls inside the park area. As for the BZ area, there are no forests to collect woods or large rivers to fish. There are only lands bearing our paddy fields and other crops. We are not even allowed to enter our own property. I am a living example of a true victim. The land certificate shows that my land falls within the BZ area wherein the river flows, but I'm prohibited to go there by the security personnel. Whatever little land is left is not sufficient or suitable enough to grow crops and so, I have grown *Khar Khadai* trees there. (Interview, October 2012)*

According to Sonahas, they were provided with the permits to enter the park once

but were withdrawn later because of rhino poachers. *"Although the permit was provided for 4 hours period after much request and pressure from Non-Government Organizations (NGOs), we cancelled it as it was neither possible nor sufficient for us to fish or collect other useful resources in just four hours. It takes about 2 hours to reach there, and what good would it do in the remaining 2 hours, which is too short for catching enough fish or gold panning?"* a Sonaha woman express. Many people from Gola VDC have complained that their houses, land and properties were located inside the BZs and they were not allowed to enter whatever-left-forest areas in the BZ. They lamented that they were not even allowed to enter BZs, let alone park areas. Most of the respondents were bitter about the fact that the PA authority treated them unfairly by not providing them with access to resources, while also giving no guarantee of their legal rights. These people had developed and harboured anti-PA and anti-security sentiments, and a general abhorrence towards the system.

Another problem they have been facing is the destruction of lives and their properties by the wild animals, mainly elephants and tigers, for which they are often not provided with enough compensation. Respondents from both Gola (Shantipur) and Pathabhar (Rajipur) VDCs noted that they have often been suffering due to the damages incurred by these animals, to both crops and human lives. Birju from Gola VDC mourned,

*Each year, we suffer from elephant attacks. We have been victims of crop damages carried out by the wildlife. A woman was killed by an elephant while she was going to her maternal home. Luckily, her baby that she was carrying*

*during the time was saved. Similarly, two people were killed in a tiger attack. There was some partial compensation for the case of elephant attack but the ones affected by the tiger killings did not even receive a hearing. (Interview, October 2012)*

Similar sentiments were reflected by Sohanlal in Pathabar VDC as he shared his feelings,

*Damages and deaths sustained through wildlife attacks are rarely compensated. Even if we get the compensation, it is not enough as it is a meagre amount of money that hardly covers the loss. It is unfair to give a family just 150000 Rupees as a compensation for the irreplaceable death of its member, wherein the government provides 500000 Rupees to those who were killed during Maoist conflict. (Interview, October 2012)*

Apart from these, local men and women have often been victims of security personnel' behavior which included physical and psychological tortures/violence and verbal abuses. They complained about the inhumane treatment that they received from the park staffs and security personnel. The respondents reported that they were not allowed to talk to the PA administration without the mediation of journalists and other influential people. "They talk often in a dominating way, undermining our confidence", reported a local Sonaha man.

As reported by Tharu and Sonaha people, different methods of tortures were exercised on them if they were found to have entered the park area. "They would often swear at women. If found in the park, men are tortured and charged, on top of having their boats and Chaudhi (fishing nets)

*seized. In case of BZs, there are rare cases of such incidents"* said a Sonaha man. Some others spoke about the maltreatment saying, "Men are made to prostrate-naked-over the sandy river bed during hot summer days, and often drowned for short periods in the cold water during winter." Tharu men in Gola VDC too experienced mal treatment such as thrashing, being forced to jump or swim in the river in winter as punishments while also receiving threats, insults and verbal abuses. Undue charges and punishments are some of the other problems that the local people have been facing. A Tharu woman revealed that in 2011, seven male Tharus were arrested and charged NRs 7000 for the whole group plus NRs 2500 per person. Several such incidents have occurred at both Gola and Pathabar VDCs.

Local Tharu and Sonaha women have been bearing the brunt of this conflict between the local people, park authority and security personnel. Because of their household responsibilities, they have a compulsion to collect fuelwood, fodder and go fishing or gold panning, which then exposes them to multiple layers of vulnerability and risks compared to men. Their participation in the PA governance is very limited and/or non-existent at the decision making level which has further led to increased risks to physical and psychological stresses as a result of stringent measures and security personal's treatment towards them. An interview with a key PA official of BNP, confirmed that there was no sufficient space for women in the national conservation policies, except for the 33 per cent mandatory participation as provisioned in the Interim Constitution of Nepal 2007, and this is also not implemented properly. The PA official of BNP commented that,



*There is no specialized law or regulation on women or their issues in conservation policies except in Buffer Zone Management Regulation. The Regulation mentions that there could be male users groups, female users groups or mixed one at the settlement level (at least 25-30 households in one settlement) depending on the necessity and geographical structure or size of the VDC or municipality. Women have often been ignored by the conservation policies. (Interview, October 2012)*

The PA policies failing to address women's concerns and their respective stakes have serious implications for the daily lives of these local women. The lack of any legal safeguard for these women's rights living along the fringes of PAs and no proper mechanism for punishment or compensation in case of violations of their rights, is one of the most significant loopholes of Nepal's PA policies.

Both the PA and security officials agreed that there were some cases of manhandling and gender-based violence in the past. However, they stressed that at present, no such incidents of violence are in practice. According to a senior PA official,

*A rape case by a security personnel came into light two years ago in Neulapur VDC- 1, wherein the woman's husband was in India and he only found out about this after his arrival. The case was then handled by the PA authority and Colonel of the Nepal Army. It was decided that the victim be provided 50 per cent property of the perpetrator. Later on, it was found that the perpetrator had no property. Thus, again the decision was made to provide the victim with a sum of NRs 150,000, of which NRs 100,000*

*be given from the salary of the culprit and NRs 25000 each from the chief warden and Colonel. In another similar case of attempted rape in Motipur-4, the security personal was fired from his job. However, there is no legal provision for such cases in conservation policy and the PA authority and chiefs of security personnel often decide on the matter. (Interview, October 2012)*

The reason behind such cases is also due to lack of formal process of lodging complaints as in the case mentioned above. A respondent at Gola VDC also confirmed that such cases were often 'negotiated' between the perpetrator(s) and the victim party through the intervention of PA and security authority, who often concluded the case with their judgments. While in many cases, the registered complaints were turned a deaf ear. The social stigma and cultural shame have made it even more difficult for the women to talk openly about it.

One of the local respondents revealed, "We deem it disgraceful when our daughters and daughter-in-laws are arrested and taken as detainees by the park authorities even though they have done nothing at all. Once my own daughter was arrested for no proper reason; however, she was left with no harm. And it is really hard for any of us to reveal that our daughters, sisters or daughter-in-laws were arrested or harmed by PA officials or security personnel." The chances of such cases becoming public are very rare. He also said that men were often manhandled and threatened by the security personnel when they were found to have entered the park area. During the maoist insurgency, local people, especially men were tortured and in some cases even killed. He recalled the Bardiya incident (The Himalayan Times

2010), in which two women and a minor were shot at when they entered the park to collect Kaulo. He also recalled another case where an individual was seen being chased by the PA officials but his body was found nowhere. Banarasi Tharu from Gola VDC shared,

*Women face sexual harassments. They are also arrested. It is often considered undignified in our community. In some extreme cases, they had been raped. However, there are no such cases in our village as they say that sexual abuse needs to be proved by tangible evidences. And we can't.* (Interview, October 2012)

A Tharu woman from Gola VDC recalled an incident when she was harassed by a security official/personnel. They accused her of fishing and forced her to go with them while she was washing clothes at the river shore. She fled somehow and later came with her friends to collect her clothes.

Many of the key informants of BNP and security personnel, however, were unaware of any rules or laws of conservation that advocate for the role of women or their issues. All the security personnel who were interviewed were completely unaware about gender-based violence. There are cases of local women having been lured into fake marriages and later on left by their army husbands when they were transferred to other locations. The respondents said that such incidents had occurred in some nearby villages. Although rare, such cases existed, and this added yet another layer of insecurity and exploitation of the local Tharu and Sonaha women as exemplified in the past.

Although there has been amendment in the Interim Constitution of Nepal (2007), adopting inclusive policy with 20 per cent

seats for women (Dahal 2010) in security services and defence sector of Nepal, they comprise of only 1.91 per cent of the total strength of Nepal Army despite its attempt to increase women's participation up to 5 per cent. In the defence sector, women as such, have been involved for combat support only, the subordinate role at its best (Adhikari 2010, 2013).

The insensitiveness of male security personnel towards local women or men can be associated to the low representation of women in the security sector. The case could have been different in the presence of women as security official/personnel. Swearing or verbal abuse by the security personnel and PA authority is common, as the respondents of both Gola and Pathabar confirmed. The security people, however, have denied this and insisted that they have not misbehaved with the locals or sworn at them, and the PA officials too have denied any allegations. According to a security personal,

*We don't manhandle the arrested people because the game scouts usually go for patrolling with us and whenever they catch anyone in the park area, the game scout takes him/her straight to the PA authority. The security personnel don't have any jurisdiction to decide on the matter.* (Interview, October 2012)

Similarly, a female game scout said that they could go patrolling on their own groups of game scouts (8 game scouts in Thakurdwara and 58 throughout the PA) or with the group of (usually 6-10) security personnel. One or two of them often join the patrolling group of security personnel while monitoring the PA, and they also go patrolling with their own group of 5 to 6 game scouts independently. Bhagat from Gola VDC has put forward his views,

*If any local person is found to have entered the park, the game scout, if he/she is on patrolling along with the security personnel, would simply take the person to chief warden and would not torture the offender. However, if a group of security personnel alone catch the person, there are chances for him/her to be abused and tortured. In both the cases, however, the ultimate right to decide on the fate of captured rests on the chief warden. So, the problem here lies not only from security personnel but also the PA official who may be biased on their decision. (Interview, October 2012)*

From these testimonies and different opinions of local people, PA and security personnel, it is clear that there is a link between PA governance policies, unfair treatment to local Sonaha and Tharu people and women's vulnerabilities to different forms of violence. The rights of local people, especially women, are at stake such that they are at the mercy of PA authority and security personnel for their livelihood and daily requirements. Already at the margin, these people are further mired into the marsh of poverty by conservation policies and regulations.

## CONCLUSION

This paper has tried to provide a comprehensive picture of the situation of local Tharu and Sonaha women in the PA institutions of BNP, focusing especially on their participation (or lack of it, thereof) in the decision making process regarding the stewardship and management of natural resources. The study also reflects on the multi-layered conflicts between the park authority, local Tharu and Sonaha people and security personnel, which have affected

the local Tharu and Sonaha women in subtle and diverse ways.

The research rests on some key findings and reveals that the practical implementation of women's inclusion and participation is minimal in the PA institutions, and at times, made redundant by not even maintaining the basic requirement of fulfilling 33 per cent women's participation. Women's participation is found to be minimal with few less-responsible positions such as a member at the ward level users group committees and VDC level users committees. There are no women in the BZMC, the key body for decision making at the regional level, hence proving that the local women have no stake in the decision making of resource governance. Foregrounding this very lack, the study also explores the diverse vulnerabilities of local women towards harassment, psychological trauma, and sexual exploitation as a result of inadequate PA governance policies. Local people, especially women are living in an environment of constant fear from the security personnel and PA staffs who often demoralise and mistreat them, apart from charging undue fines as a consequence of the conflicting interests of local people and park authority.

The study findings are directed to the law and policy makers, professionals in environmental conservation, change advocates or researchers who may be interested in the conservation policies with gender perspectives. Although this paper has its own limitation and obviously cannot capture all the aspects of local women's experiences in the resource governance, it is hoped that this paper will encourage further studies and researches to forge a strong research agenda in the realm in the days to come.

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