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## **Finding the Nexus between Gender-Based Violence and Conservation**

**John Okandi Kogada, BA (Soc), MA (Soc) & Simon  
Odiwuor Ondiek, BSc, MPH**

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# Finding the Nexus between Gender-Based Violence and Conservation

<sup>\*1</sup>John Okandi Kogada, BA (Soc), MA (Soc)

[okandiogada@gmail.com](mailto:okandiogada@gmail.com)

<sup>2</sup>Simon Odiwuor Ondiek, BSc, MPH

[kondiek@gmail.com](mailto:kondiek@gmail.com)

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## Abstract

This review paper explores the complex and multifaceted relationship between gender-based violence (GBV) and conservation efforts, emphasizing the interconnected challenges faced by rural communities. It analyzes how GBV undermines conservation outcomes by limiting women's participation, eroding traditional ecological knowledge, exacerbating resource exploitation, and weakening community resilience. Drawing on case studies from Northern Ghana, India, and Tanzania, the paper highlights how environmental issues such as resource scarcity, displacement, and conservation-related conflicts increase the vulnerability of women to GBV. The review also discusses strategies for addressing these challenges, including empowering women, integrating gender considerations into conservation policies, and creating safe environments for participation. Finally, it calls for more research into the links between GBV and conservation, urging the development of targeted interventions that address the root causes of both GBV and environmental degradation. By integrating gender-sensitive approaches, conservation initiatives can achieve more equitable and sustainable outcomes for all community members.

**Keywords:** *Gender Equality, Women's Empowerment, Social Cohesion, Ecological Knowledge, Sustainable Resource Management*

## 1.0 Introduction

Gender-based violence (GBV) refers to violence directed at individuals based on their gender, stemming from unequal power dynamics and harmful social norms (Council of Europe, 2019). While women and girls are disproportionately affected, men, boys, and individuals of diverse gender identities can also experience GBV (Council of Europe, 2019) (Wikipedia, 2024). It encompasses various forms, including physical violence (e.g., assault, female genital mutilation), sexual violence (e.g., rape, child marriage), psychological violence (e.g., emotional abuse, stalking), economic violence (e.g., financial control, denial of inheritance), and socio-cultural violence (e.g., harmful traditions, discrimination). (UN Women, 2024) (Council of Europe, 2024) (Fay & Yee, 2018). These forms of violence are often

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interconnected, with instances like domestic violence involving multiple types of abuse. Thus, understanding these manifestations is essential for effective prevention and intervention

Conservation involves the management of natural resources to prevent exploitation and protect biodiversity, ecosystems, and habitats (Definitions in the Field: Conservation, 2023). It includes maintaining ecological processes like clean air, water, and climate regulation; preserving genetic diversity for ecosystem resilience; and ensuring sustainable resource use to meet present and future needs (Vaux, 2011) (MediaWiki, 2022). Conservation is vital for human well-being, economic prosperity, social equity, cultural heritage, and climate change mitigation (Vickers, 1996) (Necissa, 2011) (Muksin, et al., 2021) (Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies, 2022). Consequently, it requires a multi-faceted approach, integrating scientific research, policy, community engagement, and education.

### **1.1 Purpose of the Review**

This review explores the complex relationship between gender-based violence (GBV) and conservation, examining how GBV undermines conservation efforts and how environmental degradation can heighten GBV risks. In doing so, it emphasizes the need for integrated approaches to address both issues for sustainable conservation.

### **1.2 Structure of the Paper**

The paper begins by defining GBV and conservation, followed by an exploration of how GBV hampers conservation through reduced female participation and resource exploitation. It then examines how environmental challenges increase GBV risks. The review concludes with strategies for addressing this intersection, highlighting empowerment, gender-sensitive policies, and inclusive spaces in conservation. Throughout, case studies will illustrate these dynamics, with recommendations for future research and action.

## **2.0 GBV's Impact on Conservation Efforts**

One of the most notable impacts of GBV on conservation is the reduced participation of women in key conservation activities. GBV limits women's involvement in conservation due to fear of violence, restricted mobility, and social stigma. Women's exclusion from meetings, training, and fieldwork deprives conservation efforts of their valuable perspectives and knowledge. For example, in many communities, women are the primary collectors of firewood and water, giving them intimate knowledge of local ecosystems. However, if women are subjected to violence or harassment while carrying out these tasks, their ability to contribute to resource management is severely compromised (James, et al., 2021). This highlights the need for further research to quantify the extent to which GBV limits women's participation and how it ultimately affects conservation outcomes.

Another critical issue is the loss of traditional ecological knowledge, which is often held by women and is crucial for sustainable resource management. GBV leads to the displacement, silencing, or even death of women, which in turn results in the loss of essential knowledge. For example, women are often responsible for seed saving and agricultural practices, which are key to biodiversity and sustainability. When these roles are disrupted through violence, the broader conservation goals are compromised (Aijazi & Basu, 2021). This underscores the importance of addressing GBV in order to protect and preserve these vital traditions and knowledge systems.

GBV also exacerbates the exploitation of natural resources, as perpetrators may use the environment as a means of control. Examples of this include illegal logging, destruction of crops, or the overuse of water resources, all of which harm both the environment and the women who rely on these resources for their livelihoods. As such, there is a need for further

research to understand the link between resource exploitation and GBV, as this could help develop more targeted and effective interventions to protect both the environment and vulnerable community members.

Finally, GBV also undermines social cohesion and hinders collective action for conservation. When communities are fractured by violence and mistrust, it becomes difficult to mobilize collective efforts for resource management or environmental protection. Strong social networks and community participation are essential for successful conservation, and GBV directly weakens these foundations. Therefore, studies examining the impact of GBV on community-level conservation initiatives could provide valuable insights for strengthening community resilience.

### **3.0 Environmental Issues and Increased GBV Risk**

Competition for dwindling resources, such as water, land, and forests, can escalate tensions and violence, particularly against women. As resources become scarcer, traditional gender roles and power dynamics can be amplified, leading to increased discrimination and violence against women who are often responsible for securing these resources. For example, women may face increased harassment or assault while collecting water or firewood in areas experiencing drought. Furthermore, conflicts over land ownership or access can disproportionately impact women, who may lack legal rights or social standing to protect their interests. The intersection of resource-related conflicts and GBV is crucial to understand, and examining case studies that explore this relationship can provide valuable insights for developing targeted interventions (IUCN, 2020).

Environmental disasters and displacement significantly increase women's risk of experiencing GBV. In particular, in the aftermath of disasters, women and girls are often forced into overcrowded shelters or temporary settlements where they lack privacy, security, and access to essential services. These conditions create a breeding ground for various forms of GBV, including sexual assault, domestic violence, and trafficking. Moreover, the breakdown of social structures and support networks during displacement further increases women's vulnerability. For this reason, research on the specific GBV risks faced by displaced women and the effectiveness of interventions in these contexts is essential. Sharma et al., (2021) discusses mitigating GBV risk in the context of crises, including displacement due to COVID-19. While not directly related to environmental displacement, it offers valuable insights into relevant risk mitigation strategies (Sharma, et al., 2021).

Certain conservation initiatives, though well-intentioned, can inadvertently exacerbate conflicts, potentially leading to an increase in gender-based violence (GBV). For example, the establishment of protected areas may restrict access to resources traditionally relied upon by local communities, resulting in economic hardship and social unrest. When these initiatives are not implemented with a gender-sensitive approach, they can disproportionately affect women, heightening existing inequalities and making them more vulnerable to GBV. Tran and Hanaček (2023) underscore the specific risks faced by women defenders in environmental conflicts, stressing the importance of considering the unintended consequences of conservation interventions. It is critical, therefore, to design and implement conservation initiatives in ways that protect the rights and well-being of all community members, particularly women (Tran & Hanaček, 2023).

### **4.0 Addressing the Intersection of GBV and Conservation**

Empowering women is fundamental to addressing both GBV and conservation challenges. By enabling women to take leadership roles and participate in decision-making processes, conservation strategies benefit from diverse perspectives and a broader range of knowledge.

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Women often possess valuable expertise in managing natural resources, yet their involvement is frequently limited due to gender-based barriers. Providing women with opportunities for training, mentorship, and leadership roles, along with promoting their participation in community forums, is essential. Furthermore, challenging traditional gender roles that restrict women's involvement can lead to more inclusive conservation practices and improved outcomes for both communities and the environment. For example, as noted by Aijazi & Basu (2021), gender-inclusive conservation practices are critical in fostering long-term sustainability (Aijazi & Basu, 2021). Moreover, a report by FAO (2021) discusses how empowering rural women, particularly in wildlife management and land stewardship, can significantly contribute to enhancing conservation efforts (FAO, 2021).

In addition, integrating gender considerations into all conservation programs and policies is essential. This requires conducting gender analyses to understand the specific impacts of conservation interventions on women and men, developing targeted strategies to address gender inequalities, and ensuring that women's rights and safety are prioritized. For example, James et al., (2021) highlights the need for the conservation sector to address gender inequity, advocating for specific efforts and resources to engage women (James, et al., 2021).

Moreover, challenging harmful social norms and promoting equitable access to resources are key to addressing the root causes of both GBV and environmental degradation. This includes working with communities to raise awareness about gender equality, promoting women's land rights and access to resources, and supporting men as allies in challenging discriminatory practices. A report by the Nature Conservancy discusses how ignoring gender inequality can worsen conditions that cause harm, particularly for women and girls (The Nature Conservancy, 2024).

Additionally, creating environments where women feel safe and respected to participate in conservation is paramount. This involves implementing measures to prevent and address GBV within conservation organizations and communities, providing access to support services for survivors, and fostering a culture of zero tolerance for violence and harassment. Sharma et al., (2021) offers insights into mitigating GBV risks in various contexts, including the importance of safe access to facilities (Sharma, et al., 2021).

Finally, showcasing successful examples of community-led initiatives that address both GBV and conservation can inspire and inform future efforts. These initiatives often involve empowering women as environmental stewards, promoting sustainable resource management practices, and fostering social cohesion to address the underlying causes of both GBV and environmental degradation. For instance, Brewster, et.al. (2004) provides examples of women mobilizing for grassroots solutions to improve access to natural resources (Brewster, et al., 2006).

## **5.0 Case Studies and Examples**

The relationship between gender-based violence (GBV) and conservation in rural communities is complex and multifaceted. Various case studies illustrate how conservation efforts can inadvertently exacerbate GBV or, conversely, how addressing GBV can enhance conservation outcomes. These real-world examples provide valuable insights into the ways conservation and GBV are intertwined in different contexts.

### **Case Study: Northern Ghana**

In Northern Ghana, conservation initiatives have shown significant gendered impacts. Women, who play a central role in managing local natural resources, are often excluded from decision-making processes about resource use and conservation. As a result, this marginalization leads to increased GBV, as women lack control over critical resources that are essential for their

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livelihoods. Without the power to influence decisions, women are vulnerable to exploitation and abuse, which exacerbates gender inequalities in the community (Soliku, 2021). Thus, this case highlights the need for gender-sensitive approaches in conservation to ensure women's involvement in decision-making processes.

### **Case Study: Sariska Region, India**

The Sariska region in Rajasthan, India, offers an example of how community-based conservation can empower women and reduce GBV. Through the involvement of women in the Gram Sabha, the local governance body, women gained greater access to and control over resources. This increased autonomy helped reduce instances of GBV, as women were empowered to negotiate their rights and voice their concerns within the community. However, the study also underscores the importance of addressing underlying power dynamics. Merely including women in decision-making bodies without confronting societal inequalities can perpetuate existing power structures, thus limiting the effectiveness of such initiatives (Torri, 2010). Therefore, it is essential to integrate gender equity into the core of conservation policies, rather than viewing it as an add-on.

### **Case Study: Kilimanjaro, Tanzania**

In Kilimanjaro, Tanzania, research indicates that socio-economic factors, such as education and financial independence, play a significant role in influencing GBV. Conservation efforts that improve women's economic status—through sustainable livelihoods, access to income-generating activities, and enhanced education—have shown promise in reducing GBV. This suggests that there is a reciprocal relationship between gender equity and conservation success: as women's economic status improves, so does their ability to protect themselves from violence, while conservation outcomes are strengthened by women's active involvement in resource management (Saffitz, 2011). Thus, this case illustrates how conservation strategies that incorporate gender equity can lead to both improved social outcomes and environmental benefits.

While these case studies illustrate the potential for positive outcomes, it is critical to recognize that conservation initiatives can also perpetuate existing inequalities and violence if not carefully designed. In some contexts, conservation efforts can unintentionally reinforce gender-based power imbalances, leading to further marginalization and violence. Thus, addressing GBV within conservation contexts requires a nuanced understanding of local gender dynamics, power structures, and socio-economic factors. By integrating gender sensitivity into the design and implementation of conservation projects, we can help create sustainable solutions that benefit both people and the environment.

## **6.0 Conclusion**

This review highlights the intricate relationship between gender-based violence (GBV) and conservation, emphasizing that the two are often interconnected in rural communities. Key findings from the literature demonstrate that conservation efforts can either exacerbate or mitigate GBV, depending on how gender dynamics are addressed in program design and implementation. Conservation initiatives that exclude women from decision-making or fail to consider local gender norms can inadvertently perpetuate violence and inequality. Conversely, when women are actively involved in conservation and given access to resources and decision-making power, both gender equity and conservation outcomes improve, suggesting a reciprocal relationship between the two.

The importance of addressing GBV to achieve effective and equitable conservation outcomes cannot be overstated. By ensuring that conservation efforts consider the specific needs, roles, and vulnerabilities of women and marginalized groups, we can enhance the sustainability of

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conservation projects while simultaneously promoting gender equality. Gender-sensitive approaches are not just a matter of social justice; they are critical to the success of conservation initiatives, as empowered communities are better equipped to manage resources, reduce violence, and ensure long-term sustainability.

Future research should explore the intersectionality of GBV and conservation, particularly in diverse cultural and socio-economic contexts. Studies that focus on how local power structures and cultural norms influence both conservation outcomes and gender violence will be crucial for developing more tailored interventions. Additionally, future research could evaluate the long-term impacts of gender-inclusive conservation initiatives on both women's empowerment and ecological sustainability.

Policy recommendations include the need for governments and organizations to prioritize gender mainstreaming in conservation programs. This could involve creating gender-responsive policies, providing training for local leaders, and developing community-based programs that empower women in natural resource management. It is also essential to integrate multi-sectoral approaches, combining conservation efforts with broader strategies to address GBV, such as access to education, economic opportunities, and legal protection for women. In summary, addressing GBV within conservation contexts is not only a matter of improving gender equality but also a critical factor in ensuring the effectiveness and sustainability of conservation efforts. By adopting gender-sensitive approaches and promoting women's agency, conservation initiatives can contribute to more resilient communities and healthier ecosystems.

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