

Key points

01

The power imbalances inherent in exclusionary conservation regimes can enable, encourage, and exacerbate GBV

02

Discrimination against Indigenous peoples or minoritised groups, including intersectional discrimination faced by women from these groups, can drive GBV and limit perpetrators' being held to account for their actions

03

Survivors often face considerable barriers to justice

04

Failure to consider gender in conservation programming can lead to GBV

05

Undermining peoples' or communities' connection to their traditional territories through conservation programming can lead to increases in GBV perpetrated against and within communities

Understanding gender-based violence in the context of conservation

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Content warning: *this briefing discusses and contains descriptions of gender-based violence, including sexual violence.*

This briefing aims to deepen the understanding of the roots and driving forces of gender-based violence in the context of conservation, particularly externally imposed or driven conservation initiatives.

Introduction

This briefing looks at the relationship between gender-based violence (GBV) and conservation, with a particular focus on externally imposed or driven conservation actions. It draws on existing research, case studies, and testimonials to explore how GBV occurs, is used, or is intensified in the context of conservation initiatives. The briefing then goes on to outline ways in which approaches to conservation can be transformed, not only to eliminate gender-based violence, but to enable healing and generate safe spaces for those affected. Indigenous women and girls, and women and girls from local communities, are often targeted and subjected to these forms of violence as a result of multiple, compounding discriminations based on their identities as women *and* Indigenous,

minorities, and, or, other marginalised identities within power structures, which include patriarchy. This briefing is not intended to provide guidance on how to address GBV in the context of conservation, but rather aims to demonstrate the scale, significance, and systemic or institutionalised nature of the problem, and to highlight the importance of both preventing the future occurrence of GBV in the context of conservation and supporting the realisation of justice and healing for those who have experienced it.

The relationship between GBV and environmental crises is increasingly well-understood.¹ Research has focussed particularly on the ways that climate change and environmental degradation have

About this briefing series: In 2003, at the 5th World Parks Congress in Durban, the conservation world made commitments to return lands to indigenous peoples that had been turned into protected areas without their consent, and to only establish new protected areas with their full consent and involvement. Those commitments have not been realised. This paper is one in a series of briefing papers that offers case studies, testimony, research, and analysis from FPP and from our partners that examine the current state of play of the relationship between conservation and indigenous peoples, and local communities with collective ties to their lands. It will expose challenges and injustices linked to conservation operations, showcase practical, positive ways forward for the care of lands and ecosystems, led by indigenous peoples and local communities themselves, and reflect on pathways to just and equitable conservation more broadly.

driven increases in GBV through heightening existing gendered inequalities, demonstrated for example in higher rates of child marriage and domestic violence;² on how GBV prevents women's participation in environmental governance; and how Women Environmental Human Rights Defenders experience GBV as a result of their efforts.³ Little research has so far focussed, however, on the relationship between GBV and conservation, despite it being well (albeit anecdotally) known that GBV is a tactic used by exclusionary conservation enforcers to intimidate, divide, and dispossess communities, generating numerous human rights abuses.

Addressing GBV in the context of conservation will remain impossible without developing better understandings of how GBV is enacted, its drivers and its consequences, through the voices and stories of survivors and those who have been affected. So far, conservation agencies have predominantly focussed on GBV as a barrier to project implementation and impact.⁴ This briefing approaches GBV rather as a manifestation of the power imbalances intrinsic to much conservation policy and practice, and as a tool used to keep those power imbalances in place.

This briefing aims to deepen the understanding of the relationship between GBV and conservation as a necessary first step in eliminating conservation related GBV. Much like other human rights abuses committed in the name of conservation – which are increasingly well-understood and recognised – GBV uses violence on women's bodies to undermine community cohesion and wellbeing, which in turn negatively impacts the self-determination of Indigenous peoples and collective environmental governance of Indigenous peoples and local communities. Eliminating future acts of GBV and seeking justice and healing from past acts must therefore be critical to supporting the realisation of individual and collective rights.

Understanding gender-based violence

Defining gender-based violence

UN Women defines GBV as “harmful acts directed at an individual or a group of individuals based on their gender.”⁵ While it may be experienced by individuals, as the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) notes, it is a “social rather than individual problem” which cannot be addressed through attention to specific instances alone;” while according to the authors of the IUCN report, ‘Gender-based violence and environment linkages: The violence of inequality,’ it is “used as a form of socio-economic control to maintain or promote unequal and gendered power dynamics across all sectors and contexts, including in relation to the ownership, access, use and benefits from natural resources.”⁶ Acts of GBV are frequently committed, likely affecting more than 1 in 3 women throughout their lifetime.⁷ Furthermore, low trust in women’s stories, experiences, and perceptions limits understandings of both how GBV manifests and its impacts.

Acts of gender-based violence can include **sexual, physical, mental, and economic harm inflicted in public or in private** and range from sexual violence- including rape, sexual assault, and sexual harassment- to domestic violence, murders and disappearances, human trafficking, sexual exploitation, honour crimes, trauma, long term mental health damage, and more.

Who experiences gender-based violence?

While GBV is predominantly experienced by women, girls, youth, LGBTQAI people and gender non-conforming and non-binary people due to the prevalence of patriarchal norms, this is not exclusively the case. This briefing, however, focusses on the experiences of women and girls due to a lack of available information about the relationship between conservation and GBV experienced by men, boys, and people who embody other marginalised gender identities.

Terminology

Victims and survivors: The terms ‘victim’ and ‘survivor’ might both be used to describe people who have had acts of GBV perpetrated against them. ‘Victim’ may be used in legal contexts, for example in the criminal justice system, while ‘survivor’ emphasises how people live in the aftermath of GBV.⁸ Most importantly, however, is that individuals are able to use the term that they prefer in reference to their own experiences. In this briefing the term survivor will be used to reflect the agency of those who have experienced GBV, but without prejudice to the need to adapt terminology in other contexts.

Indigenous peoples and communities with traditional or customary ties to their lands:

We recognise that these are highly politicised and often contested terms, and in using them we are conscious of the differences among Indigenous peoples, and between Indigenous peoples and local communities, in their political, economic, and social situations, and in their relationships with colonialism, displacement, and the occupation of their territories. In this briefing, we are using the term ‘Indigenous peoples’ when we are discussing peoples who self-identify as Indigenous, including because of their particular and close relationship with their lands, territories and resources, which includes their *prior and meaningful* connection to their traditional territories. We recognise that other groups also have close traditional or customary ties with the lands with which they live and in this briefing, we use ‘local communities’ to describe them. This also includes peoples who self-identify as ‘tribal peoples.’ Women and girls from *all* communities with such connections may face GBV in connection with conservation. The fact that Indigenous women and girls have identities as both Indigenous and women often results in perpetrators targeting them in acts of GBV in ways, and driven by reasons, that are distinct from other communities.

Conservation: We primarily use the term ‘conservation’ here to describe exclusionary or externally driven conservation actions designed and led by government or conservation organisations, on the basis of some level of denial of the underlying and customary rights of communities or of Indigenous peoples.⁹ In doing so, we acknowledge the presence of positive and rights-based partnerships in conservation between some governments, conservation agencies and Indigenous peoples or local communities. We also acknowledge that conservation outcomes and practices form part of many Indigenous peoples’ ways of life and territorial management and the same is often true for communities with customary lands and resources.

Indigenous women’s experiences of gender-based violence

The intersecting forms of discrimination that Indigenous women face shape the ways in which they are impacted by GBV¹⁰. For instance, despite the lack of disaggregated or systematically collected data on their experiences,¹¹ from the data that has been gathered, it is clear that Indigenous women experience higher rates of sexual violence than non-Indigenous women, while the economic and political marginalisation of Indigenous peoples may result in GBV being perpetrated against Indigenous women with impunity. This violence – which in many cases is a continuation of colonisation of Indigenous peoples and their territories – is often driven by attempts to expropriate Indigenous peoples’ territories, lands, and resources. As Women’s Earth Alliance and the Native Youth Sexual Health Network write in their report on Indigenous resistance to environmental violence, “violence that happens on the land is intimately connected to the violence that happens to our bodies.”¹²

We cannot de-link GBV from environmental issues, or wider attempts to undermine and negate Indigenous peoples’ ancestral ties to their territories. As emphasised above, GBV in these contexts should not be seen *only* as violence against individuals, but rather as attacks on communities and collectives. Understanding GBV in the context of conservation requires consideration of its roots and driving forces.

Understanding gender-based violence in the context of conservation

In this section, we outline several themes that have emerged from existing research, case studies, and testimonials that we reviewed and documented.

Imbalances of power in exclusionary and increasingly militarised conservation drives gender-based violence

Exclusionary or ‘fortress’ conservation oppresses and expels local people in the pursuit of creating people-less ‘wildernesses.’ The diverse and distinct environmental governance practices and traditional ways of life of both Indigenous peoples and of local communities have often been delegitimized due to discriminatory beliefs that communities living within or near highly biodiverse places are degrading the environment.¹³

As Indigenous Peoples Rights International noted in its 2022 report, exclusionary conservation policies have “resulted in cases of violence against Indigenous women including rape and sexual abuse largely committed by security guards of conservation areas such as national parks.”¹⁴ For instance, people being forcibly displaced from the area that is now Salonga National Park, DRC, recalled witnessing sexual violence carried out by government officials during the evictions.¹⁵

Violence, including GBV, is most severe in the context of militarised conservation regimes¹⁶ – that is, conservation initiatives that equip predominantly male workforce of rangers and guards with weapons and training from armed forces to combat threats to the protected areas (PA). As Judith Verweijen writes of Virunga National Park in the DRC, “gendered violence... occurs in everyday situations of cohabitation between rangers – 96% of whom are male – and the population.”¹⁷ The imbalance of power between armed park guards and local people drives GBV, especially when local people are seen as a threat to the PA. GBV carried out at the hands of PA guards and officials has been reported in numerous locations, including Salonga National Park in the Democratic Republic of the Congo,¹⁸ Chitwan National Park and elsewhere, and is not only an attack on individual women but also a tactic used to threaten and terrorise their community and undermine communities’ ability to reside in and care for their traditional territories.

These dynamics are abundantly clear in the recent example of Kahuzi-Biega National Park in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), where gang rapes were carried out against women to deter local people attempting to return to their traditional territories. Increasing numbers of people attempting to return, and increases in funding for the park, seemingly drove escalating violence, including sexual violence. A survivor interviewed by Minority Rights Group for their report on Kahuzi-Biega National Park described her perception of the assault as follows: “they’re doing this to force us off our land. It is the land of our ancestors. They kill our men, but when they find us, they tell us not to flee. After the men have fled, they rape us. It is to expel us from our land. But we’ve already refused. We won’t leave our land.” Minority Rights Group’s investigation uncovered staggering levels of sexual violence perpetrated against local Batwa women by park guards and officials, including several instances of women dying after being subjected to gang rape. Despite their detailed investigation, however, the true scale of the attacks has not yet been understood, as many community members indicated that sexual violence was more prevalent than the instances reported to the investigators.

Existing prejudices against particular ethnic groups drives gender-based violence

Indigenous peoples often face discrimination based on their ethnicity, culture, and way of life: discrimination which is rooted in false narratives designed to further colonial agendas (for example, that Indigenous peoples are less ‘advanced’ or ‘uncivilised’ and so incapable of self-governance). The same can be experienced by some local communities. This discrimination intersects with gender in multi-faceted ways that may further marginalise women from Indigenous peoples and local communities. In the context of conservation – which, as described earlier, often creates or entrenches significant power imbalances between those involved in the governance of conservation regimes – this marginalisation can aggravate women’s vulnerability to assault. As a Mosopisyek woman from Benet, Uganda, explained, “we are looked at as second-class citizens, this increases violence against us. We are seen as people who cannot protect themselves due to our poverty and the way of life we live.”¹⁹

Racist beliefs about Indigenous women also drives GBV in the context of conservation. For instance, women interviewed by Minority Rights Group who had been assaulted by guards and officials from Kahuzi-Biega National Park in the DRC stated that “they were raped because they are Batwa.” Racist myths about the Batwa which are prevalent in the region include that having sex with Batwa women will heal an individual of injury or disease. Indeed, one woman interviewed “noted that the park guards and soldiers that raped her said they were doing it to heal their backs.” Such entrenched discriminatory norms also affected Batwa women in seeking accountability for the ways in which they had been violated, as their allegations were not believed or taken seriously by park officials or the wider conservation establishment.

Women’s reliance on natural resources can increase their vulnerability to gender-based violence

Gendered division of labour within the societies of Indigenous peoples and within local communities often results in women making frequent trips into areas under conservation management. For instance, Mosopisyek women in Uganda go into the forest to collect firewood and traditional medicine, and often encounter guards who inflict GBV on them.²⁰ Forest guards in Bangladesh were similarly found to have abused women collecting firewood from protected areas,²¹ while researchers found that Pahari women in Uttarakhand, India were concerned about both the risk of encountering wild animals and “the two-legged animal,” a reference to villagers’ fear of humiliation, molestation, or arrest at the hands of forest guards.²²

Lack of accountability doubles the harm against women

Women who have experienced GBV are harmed not only by the act or acts themselves, but by the failure of the legal system or conservation institutions to be held to account, provide remedies, and where requested support healing. Indigenous women may face additional barriers in seeking justice or healing, and the failure of the state or conservation officials to provide remedy may result in long-term physical and / or psychological impacts.

Shame around GBV may prevent women from sharing their experiences.²³ In some cases, women may face losing their families and being excluded from their communities if they report what has happened,²⁴ limiting their access to justice and healing, and further marginalising them if they decide to speak out. This shame may be especially strong in instances where women contract HIV from the assault.²⁵ In other cases, while women may have family and community support, the threat of repercussions or retaliation by powerful perpetrators may prevent them from seeking justice. This silencing prevents women from accessing justice and creates an environment where perpetrators can act with impunity.

When women do speak out, barriers to justice remain – such as fees paid to local police. Batwa women in Uganda described, for instance, that “before we report to the police we first report to our relatives or head of clan since police needs money which we don’t have.”²⁶ Women are less likely to have access to money, and forcing women to request money from others (especially others with power) in their community may dissuade them from coming forwards. Women may also have specific needs when engaging with the justice system, such as interpretation if the proceedings are not in their language(s), which might not be taken into consideration. For instance, anonymity through a face covering is legally required to be provided to a survivor of GBV in Salonga National Park, DRC, but this was not honoured.²⁷ Unreasonable standards of evidence put a burden on women to ‘prove’ their experiences, while the lack of success stories of women seeking justice for GBV further dissuades other people from coming forwards.²⁸

Cases brought to the justice system or conservation officials are often not acted upon. For instance, in 2015 four women were raped by guards from Salonga National Park in the DRC at an Institut Congolais pour la Conservation de la Nature (ICCN) (the agency tasked with managing DRC’s PAs) station, allegedly overseen by the head of the station.²⁹ Reports were made to the local police and the ICCN, but no action was taken.³⁰ Eventually, with the support of organisations from outside the community, the women took a civil case to court. The court found against the women, who then appealed and eventually obtained a decision in their favour. Despite that, the women have still not received any of the reparation payments they were supposed to receive and hence have not been able to access the support they have needed to recover.

The failure of the justice system and conservation agencies to respond means not only that perpetrators act with impunity, but that more women are left vulnerable to assault. For instance, the former Deputy Director of Virunga National Park in the DRC was accused of raping, impregnating, and shooting a 15-year-old girl.³¹ After his actions had been reported, and while he was under investigation, he was removed from his role at Virunga National Park and then welcomed into a new role at Kahuzi-Biega National Park.³² A wave of attacks on local people by park guards followed his appointment.³³

Failure to consider gender in conservation programming increases the likelihood of gender-based violence occurring

Exclusionary conservation practices have often resulted in the eviction or displacement of local people, during which women are more vulnerable to GBV.³⁴ Women's needs are also often not considered in designing conservation initiatives, and as a result conservation programming can put them at risk.³⁵ For instance, the re-introduction of tigers in Rajasthan, India, has resulted in buffalo being harmed.³⁶ Women keep buffalo, and the money they earn from selling milk is important to household incomes; when this income dips or is variable they may experience GBV at home.³⁷ Furthermore, their responsibilities as 'good wives' demands that they visit areas (in collecting fodder for their buffalo) where they are at a high risk of encountering tigers.³⁸ Similarly, after livestock was removed from local people in Mikomazi Game Reserve in Tanzania, household conflicts developed when men tried to appropriate women's money.³⁹

Conservation programming that involves community members may also aim to shift gender norms, for instance by requiring that leadership roles are split between men and women or involving women in decision-making processes. However, attempting to impose sudden shifts in gender norms can result in backlash:⁴⁰ for example, GBV was used to dissuade women from taking part in ecosystem restoration activities in Nepal,⁴¹ while women taking on leadership roles in Kenyan conservancies reported facing GBV from their spouses because of their involvement.⁴²

Conservation programming may also provide income generation opportunities for women, which may also disrupt gender norms and lead to backlash.⁴³ As The Nature Conservancy has noted, implementing such programmes "without buy-in from the husbands or other community members, can inadvertently increase intimate partner violence, as their partners aim to control finances or maintain women's financial dependency on them."⁴⁴

Despite these impacts, gender-responsive programming has been seen by conservation organisations as too onerous, and GBV as 'out of scope' despite widespread awareness of its prevalence.⁴⁵ For instance, officials at a PA station in Southeast Asia became aware that a young woman had been coerced into "sex-related work" nearby.⁴⁶ Despite their attempt to report the abuse and support the survivor, the case was pushed aside as it was deemed to be 'beyond the scope' of the conservation organisation.⁴⁷

Exclusionary conservation undermines peoples' collective land tenure and community identity, which drives intra-community gender-based violence

Exclusionary conservation has often disrupted communities' ties to their territories and environmental governance institutions; such grievous harms result in numerous social harms including GBV.⁴⁸ In some instances, the harms inflicted on communities has led to increases in alcohol abuse, which also increases the prevalence of domestic disputes and GBV.⁴⁹ GBV in these contexts can be understood as 'lateral' violence, where anger about injustice cannot be expressed against those with power, so it is instead displaced, often leading to self-harm and/or expressed within families and communities, often generating inter-generational cycles of harm. Ensuring that collective land rights are respected, therefore, is critical for preventing GBV. Here it is critical to consider how Indigenous men (as well as women) are impacted by conservation programming.

Conclusion

In this briefing we have sought to centre the experiences and efforts of Indigenous women and girls, and women and girls from local communities, in order to highlight the connections between conservation and GBV and how these play out on their bodies, their communities, and their lands. However, the relationship between GBV and conservation remains insufficiently understood. We do not yet know, for instance, how these dynamics differ across geographies, or how people of other genders (asides from women) are affected by GBV in the context of conservation. We do not know whether GBV has been successfully reduced or eliminated in any specific contexts. We do not know how survivors make sense of their experiences, or what their aspirations for justice or healing are.

Nonetheless, the evidence we have been able to gather shows that the current reality is that Indigenous women and girls, and women and girls from local communities, continue to be disproportionality affected by human rights abuses inflicted in the name of conservation. Addressing GBV must be central to transforming conservation away from oppressive, exclusionary approaches.

It is critical to hear the suggestions of survivors rather than defaulting to responses proposed by those not directly affected. For instance, Batwa women in Uganda proposed a wide range of options when asked how GBV should be addressed, including psychosocial support, medical care, income generation support, the punishment of abusers, and help for survivors in accessing justice.⁵⁰ While they may offer legal recourse, if applied fairly, relying on justice systems alone – which, given the adversarial nature of criminal justice, can re-traumatise survivors and frequently fails to convict – may limit survivors and their wider communities in seeking justice, systemic change, and healing. Alternative models of redress and conflict resolution should be considered, in addition to legal routes, as requested by survivors: the Batwa women emphasised the importance of approaches which combine “punitive and psychosocial support practices.”⁵¹ Organisations like Forest Peoples Programme – which works with communities experiencing the violence of exclusionary conservation practices – must consider how they can support survivors if and when they cannot access justice or fail to receive compensation for what they have endured.

Indigenous peoples are responding to GBV connected to conservation in a multiplicity of ways, actively organising, claiming their collective rights and engaging in collective healing. In our experience, and that of the Indigenous peoples we have worked to support, we have seen that where traditional territories are managed by the peoples who know them best, whose cultures and identities are intimately linked to the wellbeing of their lands, the realisation of rights becomes possible. Securing collective land tenure is a necessary step in addressing the forms of GBV we have discussed above.

In order to transform conservation, community-led and collaborative research and action needs to be done to make visions of care for lands, ecosystems, and peoples that are free from GBV a tangible reality for women and girls everywhere.

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