

# "But now men also listen to the women" : women's-development approach in the Kanchenjunga conservation area project, East Nepal

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# “BUT NOW MEN ALSO LISTEN TO THE WOMEN” Women’s-Development Approach in the Kanchenjunga Conservation Area Project, East Nepal

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## *Abstract*

The Kanchenjunga Conservation Area Project (KCAP) provides a remarkable example of a gender-sensitive nature conservation project. The KCAP is an Integrated Conservation and Development Project (ICDP) in the mountainous area of East Nepal, jointly managed by the WWF Nepal Program and the Nepalese Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation. The project includes a specific women’s-development approach<sup>1</sup>. It not only aims at direct integration of women into nature conservation, but also applies a broad strategy and a combination of activities for women’s development. Questions arise in the context of both participatory nature conservation and gender issues. This study focuses equally on positive and critical aspects and highlights the importance of a balance between women-only and gender-mixed interventions.

As an introduction, the present article provides first a short overview of women’s integration into nature conservation projects and development efforts, followed by the outline of the research questions and methodological procedure and a brief description of the case study area. The findings including a discussion of the KCAP’s women’s-development approach and conclusions are presented subsequently.<sup>2</sup>

## Women, nature conservation and development

In line with the paradigm shift from ‘protectionist’ to ‘people-oriented’ approaches, women are on the agenda of every conservation and development project. Women should become empowered and are supposed to guarantee the

1 In this article the term “women’s development” is used to refer to unspecified approaches to women’s development or empowerment.

2 The study was conducted at the Department of Geography, University of Zurich, and is embedded within the framework of the Swiss National Centre of Competence in Research North-South (NCCR North-South). This article is based on LOCHER (2004, 2006) and updated by more recent information and a study which also included intensive field work in the KCA (GURUNG 2006). Special thanks for support go to the WWF Nepal Program and his late director Dr. Chandra Gurung and to Dr. Michael Kollmair (ICIMOD, Nepal).

success of conservation efforts. The objective of this article is centred on the question how people-oriented approaches can be successful and efficient rather than questioning such Integrated Conservation Development Projects (ICDPs). In this context we suppose that it is crucial to understand gendered actions and roles as well as gender focused project activities.

ICDPs pursue the primary aim of biodiversity conservation through community development, i.e. they seek to enhance livelihood options for rural communities as a means of facilitating a more sustainable use of natural resources (BRECHIN et al. 2002). In Nepal, the Annapurna Conservation Area and its Project (ACAP), which was established in 1986, pioneered with this approach. This concept was copied and adapted by other conservation areas in Nepal and attracted much international attention (MEHTA and HEINEN 2001; KOLLMAIR et al. 2003). Recently, a debate has arisen about the efficiency of such projects in terms of nature conservation on the one hand, and issues of social justice in implementation processes on the other (GHIMIRE and PIMBERT 1997; BRECHIN et al. 2002; GURUNG 2006). The lack of meaningful community participation in decision-making has been identified as a major weakness of ICDPs to date. Generally, it is stated that local support for nature conservation is greater if the local actors affected are given more responsibility and power in the formulation of new rules for natural resource management, because thereby these rules take local basic needs into account. Consequently, the rules are broken less often. Also, through their involvement, local stakeholders perceive the process as fairer than when it is imposed by others (GHIMIRE and PIMBERT 1997; AGARWAL 2001).

The pivotal role of women in development processes and natural resource management has been appreciably acknowledged since the increasing recognition of feminist studies in the 1970s and 1980s and it became common practice of development projects to address women in different ways with varying aims and effect (cp. e.g. TINKER 1990; MOSER 1993, BIERI 2006). A number of studies have revealed that women can contribute significantly to successful nature conservation efforts (e.g. BYERS and SAINJU 1994; AGARWAL 1997). The relevance of integrating women can be illustrated by an example of forest management in Gujarat, India: "When only men protected, women would not listen to them. They would say it is our forest so you can't stop us. But women can persuade other women" (woman from Gujarat, cited in AGARWAL 2001:1637).

Concerned feminists argue that some of the development and nature conservation projects do not result in actual benefits for women, but in fact

primarily pursue the aim of efficient project implementation, and thereby may increase women's work burdens (e.g. BYERS and SAINJU 1994; TINKER 1994). Within this contested discourse, the particular project the authors observed – the KCAP – provides a noteworthy example. However, the authors' research results show that there need not be tension between an efficiency paradigm and an empowerment approach, but awareness and careful analysis of the processes of social change that are induced by an ICDP are necessary. Work burden, gendered division of work and decision-making processes, though, remain critical issues.

## Research aims and methods

Considering the above-mentioned critics and by taking up issues from both feminist and nature conservation debates, this paper investigates the question of whether an ICDP, by applying a women's-development approach, provides a just and efficient way to implement nature conservation goals, as claimed by WILSHUSEN et al. (2002), and is able to contribute to gender equity. The following research questions are raised:

- What is the intention behind the women's-development approach within the KCAP? Which is the particular approach that the project follows in this regard? What are the implications of this approach for project outcomes?
- What is the impact of the KCAP women's-development approach on the status of women? How do women themselves perceive the project and its impact on their workload and status?

For analysis of the impact on women's status, the concept of practical and strategic gender needs is employed (MOSER 1993). Addressing practical gender needs means bringing alleviation in women's daily lives within the existing gender relations, whereas strategic gender needs require changes in unequal gender relations. Addressing strategic gender needs leads to an increase in the status of women, e.g. by enhancing women's control over resources or their participation in decision-making. Furthermore, this study focuses on women's empowerment, in other words their increased self-esteem and ability to address their own needs, be they practical or strategic ones.

The case study is based on around 50 semi-structured interviews with KCA inhabitants and on participatory observation. Martina Locher conducted the in-

interviews together with a female Nepali-English translator in March and April 2003.

Around two-thirds of the interviews were held with women. The pure female team earned considerable trust from the women interviewed in depth while addressing gender relations. A good number of interviews included key informants, such as chairwomen or secretaries of the newly established women's groups. The sample roughly reflects the economic stratification of the KCA population, but its validity may be limited by ethnic representation. In addition to these data, 10 expert interviews with KCAP and WWF Nepal Program staff and a former Senior Conservation Officer in the precursor Annapurna Conservation Area Project (ACAP) were conducted. The latter shared her experience related to the women's-development approach as applied in the ACAP, which was subsequently adapted for the KCAP. The data collected were classified according to the characteristics of interviewees such as sex, ethnicity, education level, and economic status, and codified and categorised according to qualitative research principles after STRAUSS and CORBIN (1996). Further, internal project reports of the WWF Nepal Program and other studies on the KCAP were analysed (e.g. MÜLLER-BÖKER and KOLLMAIR 2000; WWF Nepal Program 2001b; KOLLMAIR et al. 2003; MOUNTAIN SPIRIT 2003). In particular, the broadly based gender-sensitive socio-economic survey of the KCA, conducted by the WWF Nepal Program (WWF Nepal Program 2001a), provided a valuable background for field research and data analysis.

### The Kanchenjunga Conservation Area (KCA) and its project (KCAP)

The KCAP accompanies the implementation of the Kanchenjunga Conservation Area (KCA). In recognition of its rich natural and cultural diversity the Nepalese government established the KCA in 1997 as "Gift to the Earth" to support the WWF's "Living Planet Campaign". The area lies in the Eastern Himalaya (see figure 2) and is home to several endangered species such as snow leopard, red panda and Himalayan musk deer.

- 1997 “Gift to the Earth” (WWF Living Planet Campaign) & Conservation Area, declared by the Nepalese government
- 1998 start of accompanying project by Nepal’s Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation and WWF Nepal Program
- 2006 handover to the local Management Council
- Budget: in average 170’000 US\$ per year
- 2’035 km<sup>2</sup>
- Altitude: 1’200 - 8’586 m
- 65% rocks, ice, rivers; 24% forest, shrubs; 9% alpine meadow; 2% agricultural land
- Biodiversity hot spot
- Inhabitants: 5’254; ca. 1’000 households
- Ethnic groups: 38% Sherpa & Bhoṭe; 36% Limbu; 12% Rāi; 12% Gurung & Tāmāng; 2% Dalit

*Figure 1: The KCA in a nutshell (Source: GURUNG 2006).*

The KCA is accessible only on foot. Around 5000 residents from different ethnic groups inhabit an area of 2035 km<sup>2</sup>. Livelihoods comprise mainly agriculture (predominantly for subsistence use, but also some cardamom as cash crop), livestock husbandry, some handicraft and trade between India and Tibet. Around one third of the population are subsisting below the national poverty line.

As shown by the WWF survey, gender relations vary partly with ethnic affiliation, but can be considered clearly unequal in all groups. They feature a strict gender division of labour, resulting in a greater workload for women who work two to three hours more per day than their male partners. Moreover, men significantly under-value women’s voluntary community labour. While 50% of the male adult population indicated that they attended school, only 20% of the women indicated school attendance. Meanwhile, the rate of attendance for girls in the early classes in primary schools is nearly the same as that of boys, but girls from poorer families are more often forced to discontinue their education in advanced classes. Women are largely under-represented in political institutions and local community leadership, constituting around 5–10% of the members in the respective bodies (WWF Nepal Program 2001a).

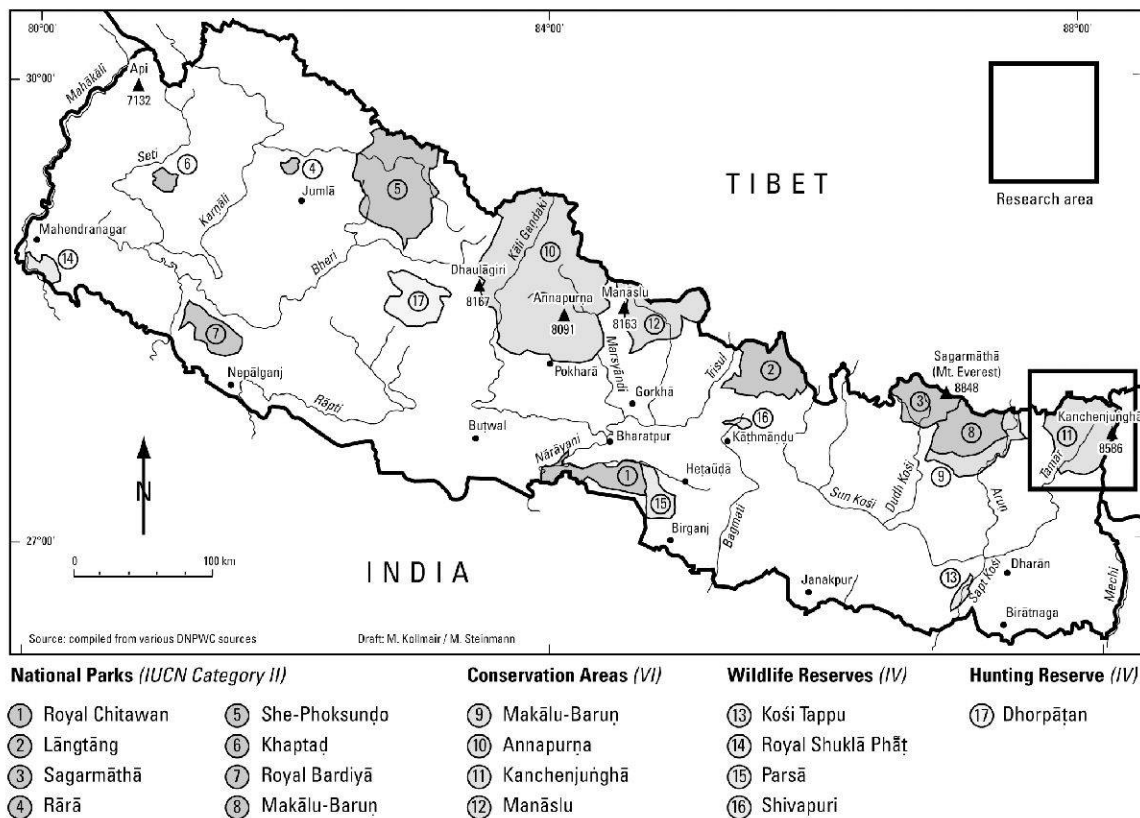


Figure 2: Protected Areas in Nepal, including the KCA (Source: compiled from various CNPWC sources).

The KCAP started in 1998 and is mainly financed by the WWF network. The project is jointly managed by the WWF Nepal Programme and the Nepalese Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation (DNPWC). Most of the field staff consists of local inhabitants (in 2005 more than 70%: GURUNG 2006:97). The project implements a broad spectrum of activities to reach the two declared overall goals of conservation and community development. On the one hand it promotes nature conservation awareness, e.g. through information tours regarding sustainable forest use, wildlife protection, waste management etc. and implementation of tree nurseries and wildlife monitoring. On the other hand it carries out diverse community development activities, such as installation of water schemes and toilets and repair of trails, bridges and schools. An important step is the establishment of new bodies at different political levels for the management of natural resources, which allowed gradual handing over the implementation of the KCAP activities to representatives of the local community. Since 2006, the local Management Council is responsible for the management of the entire KCA and will be closely accompanied by the WWF until 2009 (GURUNG

2006:97).<sup>3</sup> Women’s development activities – as an important part of the community development activities – include amongst others the formation of women’s groups, the establishment of microfinance schemes within these groups, and the provision of non-formal literacy classes. The KCAP further determines quotas for women’s participation in the above-mentioned bodies for the KCA management. Women’s potential share of seats in these bodies is illustrated in figure 3.



*Photo 1: Sherpa family in KCA (photo by Ulrike MÜLLER-BÖKER).*

To begin with, the study findings focus on the question: Why does a nature conservation organisation employ a women’s-development approach? Analysis of internal project documentation and interviews with KCAP managing staff point out a mixture of different aims and attitudes. Women’s empowerment is an

3 The handover of the KCA management to the local Management Council took place in September 2006. It is the first time that a community-based body has been entrusted with the management of a conservation area of this scale and importance (GURUNG 2006:80). The handing-over ceremony was overshadowed by a tragic deadly accident of the helicopter, which carried members of the KCA Management Council, project staff and high officials from Nepal government and WWF International.



important issue among some of the KCAP staff, but priority is clearly given to WWF conservation aims. It is basically argued that it is necessary to empower disadvantaged actors – who in this case are women – in order to facilitate participatory nature conservation. Besides these pragmatic considerations, the KCAP women's-development approach is also partly based on the efficiency paradigm. To a great extent the development activities are carried out by women and would not be as efficient without their active engagement. The managing staff indicated that planned development activities could be better implemented with women's participation, as women were more easily motivated for community work than men. The following statement of the Director of Mountain Programs, WWF Nepal illustrates this attitude: "It is the best strategy to begin with women. They are more disciplined, less cynical, and more interested in development than men" (LOCHER 2006:272).

The KCAP benefits significantly from the women's-development approach in two ways. Firstly, women mainly appreciate the KCAP, as the project addresses them directly with various activities. Men's reaction to the women's development approach is mixed and includes acceptance, envy and partial opposition. However, a majority of the men generally agree with the KCAP strategy, and appreciate the fact that they themselves benefit from the women's activities as well (LOCHER 2004, 2006; GURUNG 2006:115). Thus all in all, as an outcome of the village development activities, KCA inhabitants show a mainly positive attitude towards the project. This is crucial for the success of the KCAP, which as a participatory ICDP relies on villagers' cooperation; and the overall success of the KCAP as participatory ICDP is reflected by the expressed wish of neighbouring settlements to be included in the conservation area (GURUNG 2006:122).

Secondly, considering the importance of meaningful community participation in natural resource management, women's involvement and increased empowerment can be regarded as a promising process. As elsewhere in Nepal (e.g. METHA and HEINEN 2001), women in the KCA play a significant role in the use and management of natural resources. Moreover, as often noted in other projects (cp. e.g. BYERS and SAINJU 1994) and also pointed out by the women interviewed, women seem to be generally eager to gain knowledge and receive training. Thus, they are amenable to information on conservation awareness. Many of them seem to incorporate very well the respective knowledge provided in diverse KCAP activities. With their increased conservation awareness, the women contribute to the main aims of the WWF. They give advice on sustainable use of forests, advocate a halt to slash-and-burn practices, contribute to forest fire control, promote restrictions on collection of

certain medicinal plants, and manage three tree nurseries (MOUNTAIN SPIRIT 2003; GURUNG 2006). As a remarkable example, the women’s group members of one village chased away Tibetan poachers by pretending to be police women (GURUNG 2006:115).



*Photo 2: Limbu family in KCA (photo by Ulrike MÜLLER-BÖKER).*

In addition, a study in several countries including Asia about the effectiveness of natural resource management groups revealed that in mixed groups the collaboration and conflict resolution increased compared to groups with male members only. Similarly, the capacity for self-sustaining collective action improved with women’s presence (WESTERMANN et al. 2005). In sum, the women’s-development approach can be seen as essential for KCAP outcomes, but also of benefit to the involved women, as outlined below.

## The KCAP activities and women's development

The mainly positive outcomes of the KCAP's women's-development approach to women's lives are presented in this section, while critical issues are brought up later.

### *The activities of women's groups*

As a core activity of the project, 32 women's groups<sup>4</sup> were established in the KCA settlements, which continue their activities up to now. The members of these groups represent a large majority of the households in the area. Group composition varies by age and social class; but not all women attend the meetings regularly. By regulation, men are only allowed at women's group meetings in exceptional situations, i.e. when they need to substitute for their wives or mothers.

Each women's group was provided with 'seed money' of around 840 USD in 2000 and 2001 to start its own microfinance scheme. Over the years, these funds grew from a total of all groups of 26,300 USD in 2001 to almost double, 42,380 USD in December 2004 and the groups have spent around 4,900 USD for several development and conservation activities (GURUNG 2006:92). The women's groups gather once a month and decide on the provision of loans to their members, and control the interest and loan repayments. While the KCAP provided some guidelines and support to establish the microfinance scheme, the women's groups have adapted the regulations (amount of loan, interest rates, lending duration) to local conditions. The fund is additionally enhanced by collective savings, whereby each women's group member has to pay a small monthly fee. Women invest the loan money in income generation activities such as poultry and goat raising or carpentry, or sometimes hand it over to their husbands for trading activities. The fund not only provides the basis for the loan scheme but is also used for several village development activities. As instructed by the KCAP, each women's group chooses one girl from one of the poorest households and provides her a scholarship. The first two batches of recipients of the scholarships graduated from school, completed higher secondary school and are currently employed (GURUNG 2006:91). Two girls who receive scholarships reported that their parents encouraged them to continue with their studies instead

4 The women's groups are locally called mothers' groups. However, they are open to every woman regardless marital status or other criteria.

of getting married because of the KCAP's gender awareness activities and support for education (GURUNG 2006:115).

The chance to get loans is greatly appreciated by both female and male interviewees (see also GURUNG 2006:106). The microfinance schemes thereby also guarantee that women's participation in the groups is generally tolerated and often supported by their husbands. This is also the case for many women from poor households, who usually can only afford to invest time in such groups if they see a direct benefit for their household (see also TINKER 1990:38).

All the women's groups regularly clean their villages. The women normally gather once a month to collect rubbish and allocate it to specific waste collection places, established by the KCAP. Women's groups also organise the repair of damaged village trails by calling up all the villagers on one specific date. Men and women usually carry out this heavy work jointly and are provided with tea and snacks by the women's group members during these working days.

The formation of women's groups brought about a significant increase in the members' self-esteem. Many women pointed out that they learned for the first time to speak out in a group and lost their earlier timidity. They enjoy the opportunity to gather, exchange information and learn from occasional KCAP training sessions, e.g. on income generation activities or health. They feel very proud about what they can effect as a group, be it a visibly clean village, the installation of a new tree nursery (see photo 3), the provision of girls' scholarships, or the management of their fund. One interviewee stated: “There were big changes because of the ‘Mothers Group’: Before this, men thought that women cannot do anything. Now we did a lot of work, we could show the men that we are able to do it” (LOCHER 2004:76). As result of these development activities, the women's status within the community has increased (see also GURUNG 2006:115, 121); an illustration is given by the women in two different villages, who took action against the poor performance and constantly late appearance of teachers by locking the schools, ultimately making the teachers seek their pardon and promise not to continue with these attitudes (GURUNG 2006:109).

Men's influence in the women's groups varies greatly in the different settlements, but is largely reduced to occasional passive attendance and payment of interest in loans when they substitute for a female member of their household. However, in two smaller settlements where the KCAP has a rather low profile and gender relations are likely to be particularly hierarchical due to the ethnic affiliation, the groups are transformed into permanently mixed groups of men and women, whereby men have at least an equal share in decision-making with

women. However, other villages with the same ethnic affiliation have women's groups that function well. This stresses the importance of support by the project staff in the process of forming women's groups.



*Photo 3: Women's group members and the caretaker in their tree nursery in Sekathum (photo by Martina LOCHER).*

### *Non-formal education*

An additional important KCAP activity is the non-formal education programme for illiterate women and partly also for some men (see photo 4). Many villagers greatly appreciate this offer, yet the participation rate is much lower than in the women's groups. In six-month courses with daily lessons, participants learn how to read, write and keep a book of accounts. They also get information on community development and conservation. The KCAP thereby roughly follows the Reflect Approach (COTTINGHAM et al. 1998; BURCHFIELD et al. 2002). This pedagogical approach sees non-formal education as part of an awareness process that will ultimately lead to social action, in order to change unequal power structures. The respective activities include discussions on topics relevant to the learners' lives and innovative methods to introduce literacy and numeracy skills. In the approximately 40 basic courses in the KCA until 2004, textbooks

including pictures were provided to introduce such key issues. In two villages, advanced classes were conducted, where the learning material was prepared by the participants themselves with the help of the teacher, using tools from Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA).



*Photo 4: Advanced non-formal literacy class in Ghunsa (photo by Martina LOCHER).*

With their newly acquired skills, women are able to keep their account books for the microfinance scheme, and read letters from relatives who have migrated. However, we found that for many women the ability to sign their name is the most important change. This is obviously crucial to their self-confidence and is expressed in their vivid pride in using their signature in the women's group meetings instead of fingerprints. Women also mention less shyness towards educated (male) villagers and foreigners (LOCHER 2004, 2006).

#### *Other activities*

Besides these activities, the KCAP has also met pivotal practical needs of women and girls by providing water supply schemes and repairing trails and bridges, as it is mainly the female household members who are in charge of fetching water and collecting fodder and firewood, which are very time-

consuming duties. The enhanced water supply was explicitly women's concern in the initial phase of the KCAP (MÜLLER-BÖKER and KOLLMAIR 2000:329). Other work alleviation is provided through the distribution of back-boilers (water heating systems), which reduce the amount of fuel wood needed, thereby also contributing to the conservation aims of the KCAP. In one village, stimulated by the women's group, the KCAP also constructed a Child Care Centre, which disburdens the women with small children. Further, a girls' hostel was built in Lelep to allow girls in secondary level to study away from their home. In all the infrastructure development activities the local community contributed significantly with 16–49% of the total costs (MOUNTAIN SPIRIT 2003, in GURUNG 2006:121).

In sum, the KCAP is successful in meeting practical needs and clearly contributes to the empowerment and increased status of many local women, i.e. it also addresses women's strategic needs. It can be assumed that the success of the project is supported by the relatively small population size which allows the project staff to contact practically every household in the area.

### Critical issues of the KCAP's women development programme

The above-mentioned findings refer to positive effects of the programme towards the empowerment of women. However, there are some critical points, which relate to women's (non-)participation in KCAP activities in general and to the gender division of labour and the valuation of women's work. Last but not least we want to underline our supposition that it is crucial to reflect upon the change of gendered actions and roles initiated by the project.

#### *Women's participation in the KCA management bodies*

The establishment of women's groups is generally seen as an important tool for increasing the political participation of women, as the groups strengthen women's abilities to express their concerns in front of others and increase knowledge and self-esteem. One woman stated: "When the groups are mixed, the men talk more than the women. But now men also listen to the women; before it was not like this!" (LOCHER 2004:76). However, women's groups do not automatically lead to greater participation of women in mixed groups.

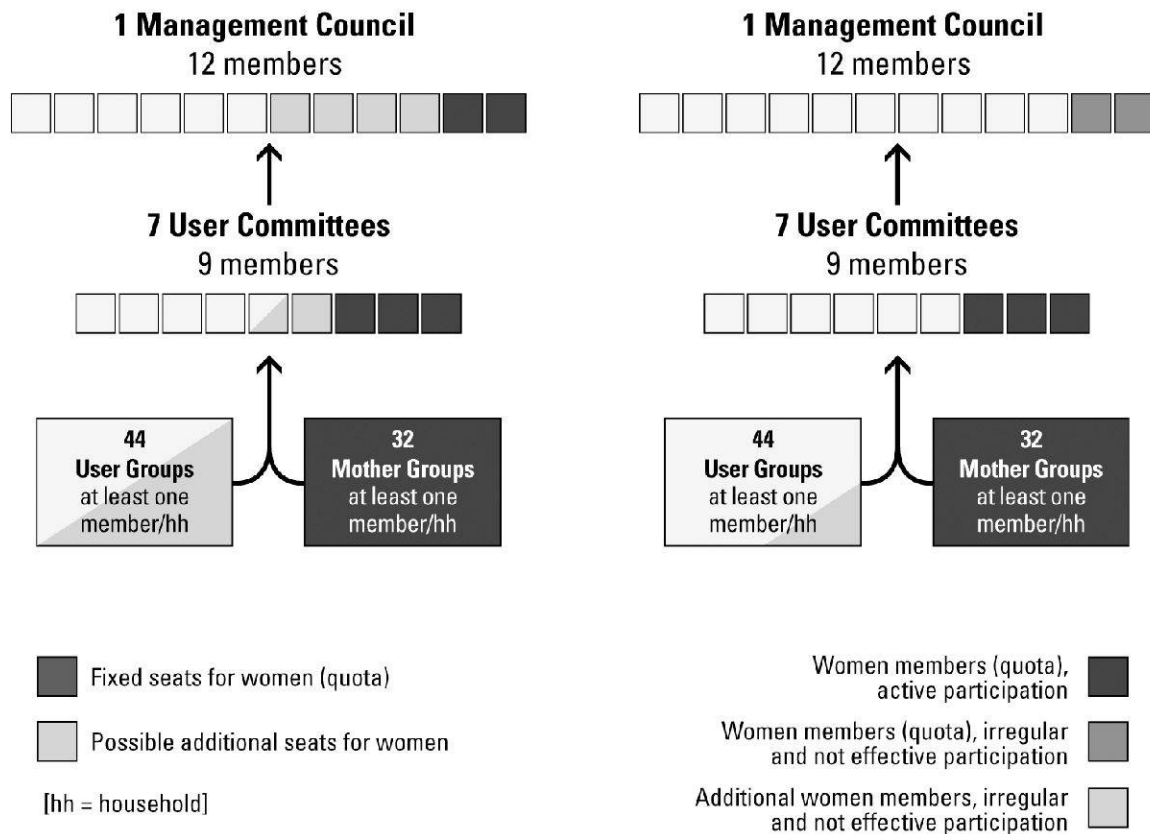


Figure 3: The women's-development approach in the context of the KCAP; left: possible participation by regulation, right: effective participation; Source: own illustration based on GURUNG 2006:84 and own data.

In the KCA user groups<sup>5</sup>, only very little women are reported to attend the meetings (cp. Figure right). In the user committees<sup>6</sup>, women actively engage in the meetings in most of the cases. However, in only one of the user committees a further woman was elected in addition to the three fixed seats. In the Management Council the two women members often miss the meetings and hardly speak a word when present. The under-representation and low influence of women in some of the KCA management bodies and in decision making processes is a critical issue.

5 Formerly called “Forest User Groups”, the village-based user groups are responsible for sustainable resource use at the local level, e.g. they elaborate and control rules for the cutting of timber and collection of firewood.

6 User committees prepare and implement an operation plan and related activities in their area as approved by the management council and in cooperation with the local user groups.



Reasons for the low female representation are manifold: Socio-cultural values and norms, such as that political and public concerns are traditionally associated with male responsibility, are (still) valid, and concerning the management of common natural resources, women are partly considered less able than men. One older woman, chairwoman of a women's group, said: "There are also other trainings, about conservation of the forests. This is difficult for women, so these trainings are for men" (LOCHER 2004:89). This statement refers to the assumption that in some cases a lack of clear communication on the part of the project staff is an additional factor causing women's low participation. In fact, the user groups – according to the regulations – are open to both women and men. However, they are often perceived as a counterpart to the women's groups and are even referred to as "Fathers' Groups" by the villagers. Therefore, many women are not even aware that they are allowed to participate.

The current situation harbours the risk of reinforcing unequal power structures by having women do most of the community work while men have hegemonic say over natural resources and ultimate decisions over KCA management. Considering the achievements of women on the local level in the overall interest of the KCA, women's increased participation in the higher decision-bodies is desirable not only to improve their social status, but also to contribute to the better management of the KCA (GURUNG 2006:124).

As pointed out by AGARWAL (1997; 2001), it is beneficial for women's participation if quotas are fixed right from the beginning when new bodies are formed. The KCAP took this important step and fixed the quotas in the legally binding KCA regulations, whereby all the KCA bodies including the women's groups are legitimised. This is the first time in the Nepali history of protected area management that a 30% representation of women in user committees is legally ensured. This strategy seems to be partly successful in the case of the user committees, whereas in the management council the low quota of one-sixth of the seats does not count for much. This observation is supported by a Swedish study, which showed that women's voices in political bodies are only heard when reaching a critical mass of about 30% of the seats (DAHLERUP 1988, in: AGARWAL 2001).

Yet compared to other local political bodies, female participation in the KCA bodies is significant. By both implementing the quotas and strengthening women's capacity for political participation through other activities, the KCAP clearly addresses strategic gender needs. However, the process will take more time and might need continued and deepened efforts.

*Women’s participation in the KCAP activities and the change of gendered actions and roles*

Projects with the objective to empower women accelerate societal change, influence balance of power and intermingle in gender relations on an intra-household level as well as on a community level.

Beginning with the change of women’s workload and the gendered work division, the results of this study show that in general, many women are willing to invest their time in women’s group meetings and community activities. They consider the additional workload as low or appropriate in comparison to the outcome, which they believe to be highly beneficial for both themselves and their villages. The women highly appreciate the improvement of infrastructure provided or initiated by the KCAP, particularly the water schemes, as they lead to considerable work alleviation. Yet, due to their existing heavy workload, women from geographically and economically marginalised households can often not afford to invest time in additional duties and long walking distances. Hence they are partly disadvantaged and may thus benefit less from the KCAP than those from better-off families, as they do not participate at all or only irregularly at the women’s group meetings, and are therefore not only excluded from the benefits of the micro credit possibility, but also from influential positions in the groups, such as chairwoman and secretary. This bears the risk to increase the gap in the socio-economic structure in the KCA (see also GURUNG 2006:122). On the other hand, the micro credit system contributes to counterbalance social and economic disparities. The interest rates of 10–15% are much lower than the rates charged by village moneylenders. Thus, the poorer households, which always depended on loans, are benefiting from the women’s groups microfinance schemes, while other richer families are the losers of this process, as one interviewee documented: “All ordinary people like the KCAP, but some rich people complain behind closed doors because they are not benefiting directly. For example, we poor Limbus don’t take loans from rich Sherpas at high interest rates anymore because of access to cheap interest rate loans from the Mother Groups” (GURUNG 2006:108).

Attending literacy classes is even more related to workload issues, as it requires daily presence (see also GURUNG 2006:109). One interviewee expressed her situation in the following words: “The old man said: ‘Why do you study, you should work!’ Sometimes I slept in the classes, because I had too much work. I had to leave the class earlier to do the household work” (LOCHER 2006:276–277). Equally important to the workload, there are strong socio-cultural values

that prevent women from participating. The often prevalent perception that women, particularly the elderly, are not able and not supposed to study, leaves many women discouraged. They express this by saying that they are too shy or too old to attend the classes, even though they would be interested in participating.

The gender division of labour, a pivotal part of unequal gender relations, has so far not been significantly changed by the KCAP. It is a common practice that men substitute for their wives or mothers in women's group meetings, because "the women are too busy" with their daily work. Yet, in some cases it has been observed that men start to take over traditionally "female duties" like cooking and taking care for the children during the women's absence while involved in KCAP activities. Thus, the KCAP is slowly challenging the given gender division of work. However, on the other hand, by handing over funds and responsibilities to women's groups, the project itself contributes to a pronounced gendering of activities.

Our data indicate that in addition to the work burden the question of the valuation of women's work in the socio-cultural perception needs to be raised. As elsewhere (AGARWAL 2001:1642), the WWF survey (WWF Nepal Program 2001a) clearly showed that men significantly undervalue women's voluntary community labour. The KCAP, on the one hand, contributes to a change in these socio-cultural perceptions by making women's work and abilities visible. In fact, many men now mention the women's achievements. On the other hand, the project partly harbours the risk of drawing on and thus strengthening the unequal valuation of work. For instance, both the monthly village cleaning and the occasional repair of trails are appreciated by all villagers. Yet, it is often emphasised by men and women that cleaning is "not hard work". Although time-consuming for the women, cleaning is valued less than the repair work, which is carried out mainly by men. In one village this attitude is strengthened by the fact that the men are paid a salary for trail repair out of the women's fund, while the women never take a salary for themselves when cleaning the village. This procedure provides a typical example of the possible dilemma between participatory and partly top-down approaches for women's development, as described by CORNWALL (2000:14–15). While some feminists argue that external support (e.g. from NGOs) is important to improve women's status, and bargaining power respectively (AGARWAL 2001:1642–1644), others stress that women should be empowered by listening to their voices (e.g. KABEER 1998:17). In the given example the question is whether the women's decision and discretion or the externally perceived strengthening of unequal gender

relations should be given priority. In that case we suggest an open debate with the involved women to address this critical issue. If it is decided to pay men for the extra hard work they do, it should be considered to find another fund, e.g. it should be proved whether women could apply for money out of the VDC<sup>7</sup> fund or collect a separate fund from all village members. The women would remain in the position of the ones who organised and coordinated the activity, while the labour would be financed by a public or common source instead of women's money.

Some of the critical issues presented above could be tackled by further increasing gender awareness among the project staff and strengthening the Community Mobilizers. These are two local women hired by the KCAP whose duties are, among others, to support the women's groups, to encourage women to participate in the KCAP activities and – where necessary – to help persuade male household members to tolerate the women's engagement. However, criticism must be weighed against the fact that the transformation of socio-cultural values generally takes more time than a few years. In addition, many of the above-mentioned concerns have their roots in the economic and social stratification of the population and the physical conditions of the area (remoteness, long walking distances). It must be considered that a relatively small project like the KCAP has limited options, if any, to change these general circumstances.

### Discussion of the KCAP's women's development strategy

Considering several constraints on such processes, the KCAP must be rated as a rather successful project in increasing women's status, even in comparison to Nepal's general policy on women's development (CWD 1994; BHADRA 2001; TAMANG 2002) and findings of other studies from South Asia (e.g. WICKRAMASINGHE 1993; GOETZ and SEN GUPTA 1996; ROZARIO 1997). However, from a feminist point of view, it is obvious that strategic gender needs could be addressed more emphatically, e.g. by raising the quota for women's participation in the KCA management bodies, or by challenging gender division of labour more directly and facilitating the equitable cooperation of men and women. From the KCAP's perspective, on the other hand, it is understandable

7 Village Development Committee: local administrative unit with own budget for development activities.

that women's development is not advocated in more radical ways. Such a procedure would be likely to provoke major resentment among men, which could lead to negative attitudes towards the project and hamper men's cooperation in participatory nature conservation, the main aim of the project. The former project manager made this kind of negative experience in two other nature conservation projects in Nepal and therefore it is avoided in the KCAP (GURUNG 2006:142). The authors of this study argue that this pragmatic approach may also be in the interest of the women themselves, as it reflects the perception and wishes of many local women better than a radical approach. It may also be helpful to reduce to some extent related (violent) conflicts between men and women, which often come along with (drastic) changes of gender relations.

As the women's development is not the main and only aim of the KCAP, men are also included in various activities and partly benefit of the project. This circumstance might contribute to the positive impact of the women's-development activities due to two reasons. First, men's resistance is probably lower than towards a project, which would target women only, and they partly support their wives in their activities. Second, this approach, by not focusing only on women, is also corresponding to the attitude of some women, who feel they do not deserve a special support, unless men do not get support as well. They perceive poverty as prior problem compared to women's lower status, as the following statement of a women's group member shows: "It would be better if boys also get scholarships, they are also poor" (LOCHER 2004:97). The KCAP's rather balanced approach (in general, although not regarding the scholarships and microfinance scheme) may contribute to the women's positive attitude towards the KCAP and thus to their active engagement.

As considered best by TINKER (1994:376), the KCAP addresses women's interests both separately and in an integrated way by providing women-only membership in the women's groups, but integrating women in the KCA management bodies and men in the non-formal education classes, respectively.

In the precursor ACAP, experience over the years has shown that women's groups alone do not automatically lead to women's integration in mixed bodies, even though they might be very strong. Moreover, and in addition to the quota, it is crucial to supervise and support women by informing, motivating and coaching them (see also BYERS and SAINJU 1994). Also, in view of the related strong socio-cultural values that hamper women's participation, clear communication from the project staff regarding women's possibility to become members is needed to increase the share of women's seats in the management

bodies. Further a continued dialogue with all members of the concerned bodies is necessary to create awareness and support for women's views and needs. Part of this is already done in KCAP through the community mobilizers, but might need further efforts.

While women's participation in KCA management bodies is still weak, they have a growingly strong status in their local communities. On the settlement level, the women's groups are reported to be much more effective than user groups in taking decisions and implementing development and conservation activities. The capacity of the local level user groups, consisting of mainly male members, is reported to be limited. There is only poor cooperation between the women's groups and other groups. This seems to be a result of the competition between the different institutions about the supremacy in village level development efforts (GURUNG 2006:116). A male interviewee stated: “Mothers' Groups are more powerful and capable in implementing project activities than other mixed or men groups” (GURUNG 2006:115). The husband of a women's group secretary said, half complaining, and half laughing: “We build trails. But everything is managed by the Mothers' Group. We are just their workers” (LOCHER 2004:98). Another man added: “We have to listen to the Mothers' Groups because they have the money and skills, and they are a very organised group” (GURUNG 2006:107). As indicated above, the microfinance scheme is very attractive to the local people. Indeed, some male interviewees complained that there is no similar possibility for men as for women: “Many poor women and their families are making a decent income from piggery, goat keeping and other businesses. But I have no wife so I don't get a loan. It would be very nice if the project established ‘Father's Groups’ to benefit poor single men like me” (GURUNG 2006:108).

There are indications that men's dissatisfaction regarding the KCAP's focus on women's development is slightly increasing (see also GURUNG 2006:115). The authors support a positive discrimination of the women in the KCA. However, it might be critical to have women dominate the village level activities, while men have the control over the higher level decisions. The KCA management should continuously pay attention to debate these issues. Men's better integration in local level decision-making and involvement in respective activities should be targeted. For instance, funds could be provided to the local level user groups for certain activities. Likewise, the aim of women's increased participation in the mixed groups on all levels should be further supported, as outlined above.

Recapitulating, the KCAP is applying a well-balanced women's development strategy, which is based on the following three interlinked principles. First of all, the overall strategy not only integrates women in nature conservation, but follows recent approaches for women's development, which means it comprises elements of gender mainstreaming by providing gender sensitisation training to the entire staff and has conducted a gender-disaggregated socio-economic survey. It addresses both practical and strategic gender needs, and strongly focuses on women's empowerment. Secondly, this overall strategy results in the implementation of a broad combination of activities. The activities are complementary and strengthen the women's development process in different spheres. As an example, the integration of microfinance schemes in the women's groups plays a pivotal role, as they provide a socially acceptable rationale for women to meet (see also AGARWAL 1997). Also the non-formal classes have twofold meanings, as the women can apply their new skills not only for private use, but can also practice and display them regularly in the women's group meetings. Thirdly, the KCAP addresses women both separately and in an integrative way. It thereby learned its lessons from the precursor ACAP, which in the beginning focused on women only and had less positive experiences.

In sum, the authors assume that the basic principles of the KCAP approach set out above provide a basis for promising women's-development efforts elsewhere. It may not be possible to transfer the KCAP activities as they stand to any other part of the world, but the approach may be adapted to local conditions in other areas by conducting a preliminary gender-sensitive survey, providing training for local staff and carefully balance the women-only and the integrative activities.

## Conclusions

From a pragmatic point of view, and with the reservations mentioned above, the KCAP women's-development approach can be seen as beneficial for both women's status and overall project outcomes. This, therefore, illustrates AGARWAL's (1997) point that there is no immanent contradiction between the efficiency paradigm and women's development. It can be concluded that the KCAP, with its women's-development approach as a significant component of the programme, serves as a positive example of the "pragmatically feasible and socially just" way (WILSHUSEN et al. 2002:18) to implement ICDPs. Yet the

present article reveals the importance of a critical focus on gender issues, even where project activities are exclusively meant to benefit women. The delicate process of changing unequal gender relations has various obstacles, which requires a very close look at both women and men. The process is even more complex when considering other interests such as nature conservation at the same time. This is the challenge of implementing and also examining the KCAP. An attempt was made to strike a balance between feminist and conservationist views, applying some pragmatism, while not losing sight of the clear aim of gender equity. Considering research methodologies, it was found that MOSER's (1993) concept of practical and strategic gender needs was helpful in sharpening the view of differing implications of project activities on women. For future research in the case of the KCAP, among other issues, it is worthwhile to examine the livelihood conditions of the most marginalised households in the KCA in depth, as well as the influence of social stratification within the villages on the empowerment process of women from different social groups. Furthermore, a detailed focus on the KCAP's impact on women's status within their households is recommended. In particular more detailed analysis of the impact of the microfinance schemes might provide further valuable findings, as the effects of micro credit programmes on women's status in the household are strongly debated in other studies (e.g. GOETZ and SEN GUPTA, 1996; ROZARIO 1997; KABEER 1998). Whereas the positive impacts of microfinance schemes on women as a social group in their community are not challenged in this article, further research is required to point out in more detail the implications for women at the household and individual level. Questions concerning intra-household conflicts and social pressure by the women's groups, as well as the risk of indebtedness and increased workload, must be addressed (see e.g. PREMCHANDER 2006). Last but not least, it will be highly interesting to follow this cutting-edge project on its challenging way to find the right balance between women-only and integrative activities in order to meet the requirements of nature conservation and development goals, including gender equity.



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