

Struggles over natural resources around Nechisar National Park, Ethiopia: why gender matters to conservation

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Abstract

The literature on the relationship between 'people' and 'parks,' underreports the impact of nature conservation on women. While researching the influence of Nechisar National Park, in Ethiopia, on the livelihoods of local people, we discovered a troubling pattern of violence against women. In this paper, we investigate gendered access to natural resources and related violence against and among residents living in and around Nechisar National Park.

Based on the life stories of 19 women and 17 men living in or around the park, we gained insights into local experiences and perspectives on natural resource management following the park's creation. Access to livestock, land, forests, and fisheries is predominantly controlled by men, while women manage dairy products, agricultural produce, and firewood. Fishing is exclusively carried out by men, though widows of fishermen can trade fish when employing a male assistant.

Drawing on concepts of power and authority, we link contested control over natural resources to violence at both societal and individual levels. Just as the creation of a national park and the ensuing violence against local people can be seen as mechanisms to assert the state's control over land and people, we argue that gender-based violence perpetuates male dominance over resource access. The establishment of Nechisar National Park has further restricted access, increasing women's vulnerability to abuse and placing a substantial burden on them.

This case study illustrates the importance of gender considerations in conservation efforts, particularly in situations where women's access rights to natural resources are disadvantaged. For nature conservation to achieve ecological and social justice, the impact of the creation of a national park on women's lives needs to be assessed more thoroughly than is typically done.

Keywords: gendered access rights, Guji pastoralists, Koore farmers, fishermen, firewood collectors

1. Introduction

The relationship between local communities and conservation areas has been the subject of numerous studies. The primary debate centres on the effectiveness of ‘strict conservation’ and its environmental justice implications for local communities versus ‘community-based conservation’ approaches (Agrawal & Redford, 2009; Brockington & Igoe, 2006; Neumann, 1997; Redpath *et al.*, 2017). While gender issues are often recognized as important in this context, there has been limited investigation into how women are specifically affected by conservation projects. Al-Azzawi (2013) notes that no more than 0.5% of the literature addressing environmental conservation issues incorporates a gender dimension. Similarly, in the book ‘Nature Unbound: Conservation, Capitalism, and the Future of Protected Areas’ (Brockington *et al.*, 2008) – which examines the socio-political impacts of protected areas and provides a critical account of the politics of environmental conservation – the word ‘gender’ is mentioned only in a general statement regarding disputes over natural resources:

[...] Of course, these fights can also reveal the heterogeneity of particular communities, as they frequently – though by no means always – occur along lines of ethnicity, kinship, length of residence, livelihood practices, educational status, age, gender, social class, affinities to political parties and NGOs, and in perennial disputes between ‘cultural traditionalists’ and ‘modernizing elites’. (Brockington *et al.* 2008: 89)

Furthermore, only two examples are provided in the book of how women may be affected by conservation areas. The first example is formulated as a hypothetical case, where it is suggested that “[...] Lost income for women, resulting from the sale of traditional medicines gathered in protected areas, may be due to employment opportunities given to young men to act as forest guards” (Brockington *et al.*, 2008). The second example refers to Sian Sullivan, who reported that “in Namibia, conservancy operations prioritize hunting and wildlife over other natural resources and can perpetuate discrimination against women’s resources and participation in resource management” (Sullivan 2000, cited in Brockington *et al.* 2008, p. 98). Similarly, when reviewing National Biodiversity Strategies and Action Plans (NBSAPs), (Clabots & Gilligan, 2017) found that out of 254 NBSAPs, just over half (56%) contained “gender keywords that indicate some recognition of gender considerations in biodiversity strategy and action planning – and some level of attention to or implementation of gender

equality commitments...” (Clabots and Gilligan 2017: 41). It appears that gender scholars have paid little attention to wildlife conservation, while conservation scholars have not thoroughly explored the aspects of “gender.”

Despite the limited attention given to gender issues in conservation projects, since the 1990s many African countries have enacted laws governing access rights to land and natural resources, granting equal rights to women and men (Anseeuw & Alden, 2010; Boone, 2017; Peters, 2015). Examples of such new laws include Ethiopia’s 2005 Rural Land Administration and Land Use Proclamation (Bezu & Holden, 2014), Tanzania’s 1999 Village Land Act and the Land Act (Dondeyne *et al.*, 2003; Peters, 2015), and Mozambique’s 1997 Land Law (Kaarhus & Dondeyne, 2015). In practice, actual access rights are far from equal, and there is an ongoing debate on how these inequalities should be addressed (e.g. Goodman *et al.*, 2005; Holden & Tefera, 2007; Kaarhus & Dondeyne, 2015; Nightingale, 2006).

While conducting interviews in Nechisar National Park in southern Ethiopia to gain insights into the relationship between people and parks (Tsegaye *et al.*, 2017), we were struck by the frequency of reported violence against women. In this paper, we analyze the interconnection between violence and gender in a context where conservation agencies, in pursuit of nature conservation and tourism development, sought to control and limit access to natural resources. The natural resources in question include land, livestock (mainly cattle, goats, and sheep), firewood, and fisheries. The cases of violence we discuss are related to the park’s management and involve violent incidents affecting both women and men, but also instances of interpersonal and domestic violence against women. Our study contributes to the body of empirical data concerning the vulnerable position of women in Ethiopia and adds to the ongoing discussion on environmental justice in conservation (Armitage *et al.*, 2020; Kopnina & Washington, 2020; Martin *et al.*, 2013, 2016). Environmental justice is often associated with social justice, particularly in relation to the distribution of risks and benefits. Social and environmental justice can come into conflict with ecological justice, or animal welfare, in situations involving competing interests such as human-wildlife conflicts or trade-offs related to ecosystem services (Kopnina & Washington, 2020). Ecological justice is defined as the recognition that non-human beings, such as animals, have entitlements and that their well-being is a matter of justice (Byrne, 2010). Efforts to protect rare and endangered species and habitats are often made, implicitly or explicitly, on the argument of ecological justice

(Martin *et al.*, 2013; Washington *et al.*, 2024). We share the viewpoint expressed by Kopnina and Washington (2020) that ecological justice and social justice are both essential and interlinked, and we also believe that both are necessary for the long-term success of conservation efforts.

The paper is structured as follows. First, we present a conceptual framework examining the relationship between power and authority in the context of gendered access rights to natural resources and violence at both societal and individual levels. Second, we detail our research methodology. Third, we provide background information on Ethiopia and Nechisar National Park, our case study area. Fourth, we discuss our research findings, exploring the dynamics of power and authority at both societal and individual levels and their connection to violence against women. Finally, we argue that the vulnerable position of women within local communities has been exacerbated by the governance and management style of the park. In conclusion, we stress the significance of considering gendered access rights to natural resources at both the societal and individual levels to enhance environmental justice in conservation projects.

2. Violence and gendered control access over natural resources

The connection between violence and conservation has garnered increased attention in both academic and activist circles (Bocarejo & Ojeda, 2016). Political ecologists argue that state agencies frequently employ conservation efforts as a means to assert their authority over both territory and people through the establishment of protected areas (Devine, 2014; Ribot & Peluso, 2009). While conflicts with, and violence against local communities have received much attention in the literature on people and park relations, less consideration has been given to gender-related aspects and the position of women within this context (Colfer *et al.*, 2017; MacGregor, 2019). In contrast, in feminist literature, the importance of gender within environmental issues has long been recognized, sparking considerable debate over how to conceptualize the gender-environment relationship beyond biological determinism (Nightingale, 2006).

In line with Sikor & Lund (2009), authority is defined as the manifestation of legitimate power, closely tied to property and access to natural resources. At the societal level, the establishment of a national park symbolizes the state’s control over these resources (Figure 1). When local communities do not recognize the state’s authority, the creation of a national park can lead to violent actions. Such actions encompass forced displacement of people from the park, and counter actions by local residents such as hunting (Mariki *et al.*, 2015; Ontiri *et al.*, 2019) or setting bushfires (Dondeyne *et al.*, 2009).

At both societal and individual levels, access to natural resources can be a source of conflict and violence. Specifically, at the individual level, when access rights to resources are gender-based, domestic and interpersonal violence can be seen as mechanisms for men to assert their control over natural resources, mirroring the state’s use of violence to establish a national park. In this manner, a parallel can be drawn between actions taken at societal and individual levels, whereby both can serve as mechanisms to assert challenged authority over natural resources.

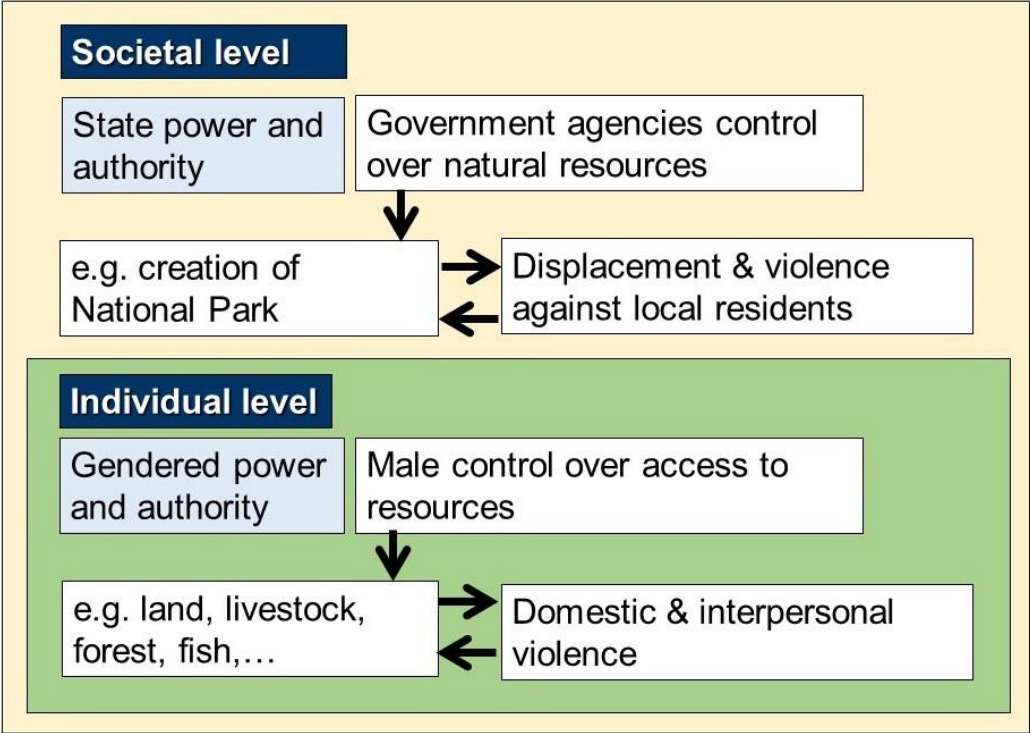


Figure 1 - Conceptual framework illustrating the parallel between the societal and individual levels in the links between power and authority concerning access to natural resources, and domestic and interpersonal violence. The arrows represent actions taken by state agencies, local communities, and individuals.

Our conceptual framework leads to the proposition that state violence against local communities reaffirms challenged authority over natural resources, while domestic violence against women functions similarly to assert male control over resources. This dual-level mechanism operates within society, where institutional violence (e.g., displacement) at the societal level is countered by actions such as e.g. hunting by local people. Similarly, at the individual level, male violence against women is resisted, and efforts are made to change cultural norms. In the local context, male control over resources and violence against women are seen as part of the culture and tradition. These mechanisms of control, while enacted by individuals, are deeply embedded in societal structures. The decisions to assert control, or resort to violence, at the individual level are made by individuals, reflecting broader societal norms and injustices.. In contrast, decisions by state authorities, such as the creation of a national park and the resulting forced displacements, occur at the societal level and have systemic implications. For example, in the case of Nechisar National Park, thousands of people were forcibly displaced without compensation for either the ‘direct’ or the ‘indirect’ costs (Tsegaye et al., 2017).

Using this framework, we analyze the impact of a contentious national park on local livelihoods at the societal level, with a specific focus on its effects on women. At the individual level, we explore how gendered access rights to natural resources are linked to domestic and interpersonal violence against women. These insights are crucial to conservation efforts because they reveal the intricate connections between gender dynamics, resource management, and social stability within communities affected by conservation initiatives.

3. Methodology

Our study is grounded in Ethiopia’s diverse cultural history and the specific context of Nechisar National Park’s creation and management. We collected oral testimonies between July and September 2013 from four groups of people directly dependent on the park’s natural resources. These groups are Guji pastoralists within the park, relocated Koore

farmers, firewood collectors in the nearby town of Arba Minch, and fisherfolk living in and around the town. All participants were informed about the research's purpose, provided explicit consent, and were assured of their anonymity. While our sampling was not random, we made efforts to connect with people in various locations to capture diversity within and across groups. Key informants, including park guards, assisted in identifying potential interviewees.

In the park, the first author travelled to all accessible areas, sometimes walking up to 15 km, to meet with Guji people. Koore people were interviewed in villages in the Amoro Mountains to the east of the park (Figure 2). Firewood collectors were interviewed if encountered by chance in the park or in town. We contacted widows of fishermen through the Arba Minch Fish Cooperative Association, and also interviewed two elderly men from the cooperative, along with three independent fishermen at the fishers' campsite. Interviewees were asked to narrate their life stories and relate major life events to changes in access to natural resources. Our goal was to interview 40 people, and we successfully conducted 19 interviews with women and 17 with men (Table 1). In the appendix, four testimonies of women representing each of the four groups and two testimonies of men are presented.

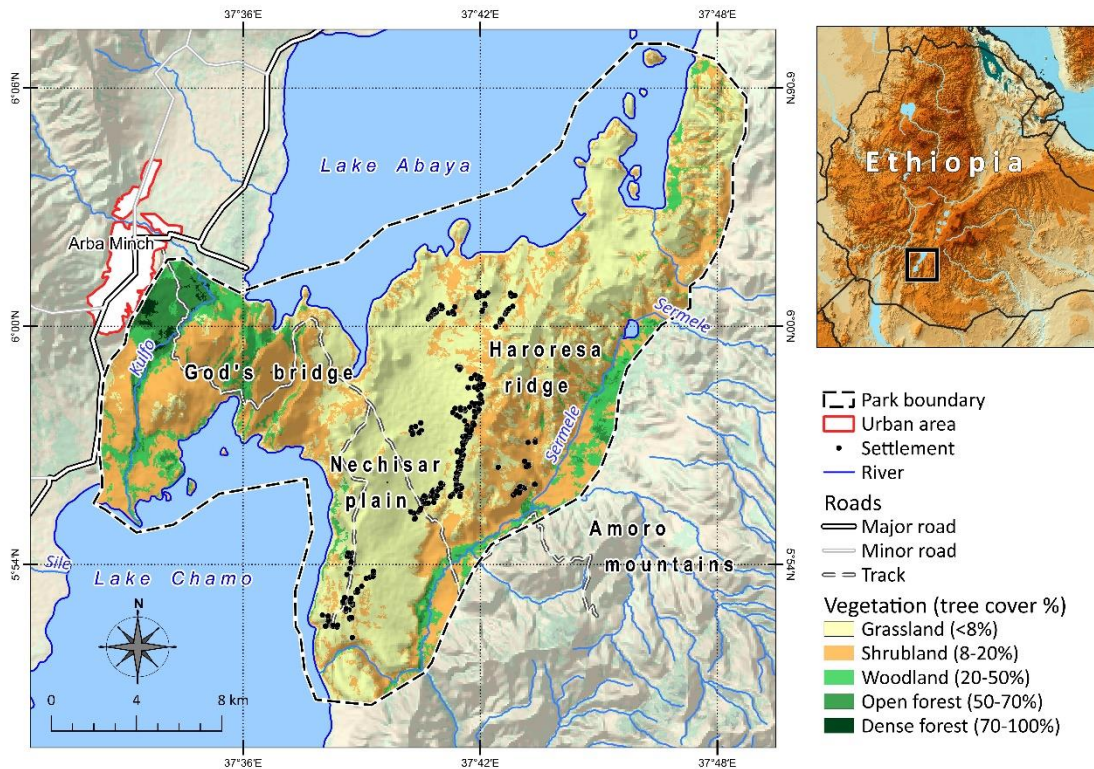


Figure 2 - Human settlements, road network, and vegetation of Nechisar National Park. [authors map based on Tree cover data from (Hansen et al., 2013); Settlement data based on satellite images from 2004 accessed through Google Earth]

Table 1: Breakdown of the number of interviewees per group and gender

Group	Women	Men	Total
Guji people	5	5	10
Koore people	5	5	10
Firewood collectors	5	2	7
Fisherfolks	4*	5**	9
Total	19	17	36

* all widows; ** two members of the main cooperative and 3 independent fishermen

Interviews typically lasted between 1½ to 3 hours and were recorded using a handheld digital recorder. The first author, a native Amharic speaker, conducted the interviews. Park guards assisted with translation from Oromifaa (spoken by Guji people) and Koorete (spoken by

Koore people). Interviews with firewood collectors and fisherfolk were conducted in Amharic without park guards present. All interviews were transcribed and translated into English. The oral testimonies were thematically analysed (Nowell *et al.*, 2017) by highlighting and coding sentences related to gender, gendered access rights to natural resources, and violence.

4. Background

4.1. Nechisar National Park and access to natural resources

Nechisar National Park, situated along Lake Chamo and Lake Abaya in Ethiopia's southern Rift Valley, spans approximately 450 km². Established in 1974, its primary objective was to safeguard the Swayne's hartebeest, an antelope endemic to Ethiopia, making it one of the country's key tourist destinations (Vymyslická *et al.*, 2011). The park's diverse ecosystems include an evergreen forest close to Arba Minch town, marked by indicator species such as *Trichilia emetica* Vahl and *Celtis africana* Burm f. (Shetie *et al.*, 2017). The volcanic hills between the two lakes are dominated by woodlands and shrublands, with common species like *Acacia nilotica* (L.) Willd. ex Delile and *Acacia mellifera* (Vahl) Benth. (Shetie *et al.*, 2017). In the central part of the park, grasslands prevail, with species like *Chrysopogon aucheri* (Boiss.) Stapf and *Tetrapogon roxburghiana* (Schult.) P.M. Peterson (Shetie *et al.*, 2017). The park's name, Nechisar, originates from Amharic, where "nech" means white and "sar" means grass. This name reflects the transformation of grasslands into a white expanse during the dry season.

Local communities, representing diverse groups, heavily rely on the park's natural resources for their livelihoods. Guji pastoralists, who inhabit the park, rear over 70,000 cattle and goats, primarily for subsistence (Schubert, 2015). The livestock fulfils their basic needs, with surplus animals sold in local markets. The Koore people, initially residing within the park, are subsistence farmers who also sell surplus produce locally. Most of the Koore population has been resettled to the Amoro Mountains southeast of the park, but many return to the park to access resources. These communities predominantly live in dispersed settlements, connected by tracks within the park. Arba Minch residents, representing various ethnic groups, including Gamo, Gofa, Dorze, Kemba, and Welayeta, gather firewood from the park's

forests and woodlands. Typically, neither Guji nor Koore people are engaged in this activity, as it is mainly undertaken by impoverished urban women who sell the wood at local markets. Fishermen primarily operate on Lake Chamo and reside in Arba Minch or nearby villages. Fishing is an occupation dominated by men, organized through fishing cooperatives or practiced individually.

The management of Nechisar National Park has undergone four significant phases in its history. Initially, following its establishment in 1974, the imperial regime was succeeded by the *Derg*, a military-socialist government. During this period, both the Guji and Koore communities were forcibly evicted from the park. In 1991, the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) toppled the *Derg* regime. The park's control was weak during the initial years of the EPRDF's rule, leading to the return of the Guji and Koore people to the park. In 2004, an agreement was signed between African Parks, an international non-governmental conservation organization with a focus on making national parks economically viable, the Ministry of Agriculture of the Federal Government, and the Government of the Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples' Regional State. The agreement aimed to resettle all people living within the park, resulting in the relocation of about 9000 individuals, mostly Koore, to an area approximately 15 km south of the park. Some Guji people were compelled to move to remote areas within the park. This period also witnessed the eviction of fishermen and a complete prohibition of private fishing. Due to resistance by Guji residents, African Parks withdrew from the park in 2008. Subsequently, the park's administration was transferred to the Ethiopian Wildlife and Conservation Authority. Currently, the park management and the authorities of the Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples' regional state consider the Guji people as illegal settlers, while the Oromia regional state authorities view them as legal inhabitants. Under the current ethnically politicized regime, these conflicting perspectives have resulted in frequent conflicts between the Guji and Koore communities (Bedane, 2021; Bedane *et al.*, 2020).

4.2. Women's access rights to natural resources

Ethiopia is characterized by its rich cultural diversity, boasting more than 80 distinct ethnic groups (Abbay, 2004; Pagani *et al.*, 2012). Some of the prominent ethnic groups include the

Tigrayan people residing in the northern Ethiopian Highlands, the Afar community in the northern Rift Valley, and the predominantly eastern-dwelling Somali people. Historically, the Amhara people have held a dominant political and cultural presence, primarily inhabiting the north-western highlands. The Oromo people, to which the Guji people belong, are the largest ethnic group in Ethiopia, occupying the central and eastern highlands, with significant representation nationwide. Additionally, various smaller ethnic groups live in the southern and western regions of the country, including the Koore people (Abbay, 2004; Pagani *et al.*, 2012).

While the status of women may vary across different cultures, in Ethiopia, men typically hold sway in political, economic, and social domains (Debsu, 2009; Kedir & Admasachew, 2010). Women remain underrepresented in decision-making positions. For instance, women only held 25.4% of senior positions and 34.3% of technical posts in the Ethiopian government, indicating a significant underrepresentation of women in higher-level roles (Ferede, 2024). In rural areas, women shoulder a greater burden than men when it comes to time- and labour-intensive domestic tasks. It is estimated that rural women in Ethiopia work up to 15-18 hours a day, juggling income-generating activities and household chores (Legovini, 2005).

Although Ethiopian land laws stipulate equal acquisition and usage rights for both female and male citizens, women often do not inherit land from their parents. Instead, access to land typically depends on marriage (Bezu & Holden, 2014). In southern Ethiopia, women move to their husband's homesteads, inevitably increasing their dependence on their spouses and in-law families.

4.3. Violence against women

In Ethiopia, violence against women is deeply ingrained and often socially accepted rather than challenged (Kedir & Admasachew, 2010). Gender-based violence, including forms such as battering, rape, defilement, sexual harassment, female genital mutilation, forced marriages, widow inheritance, and verbal abuse, constitutes the most prevalent and persistent violations of the rights of women and girls (Shanko *et al.*, 2013; WHO, 2021).

Additionally, rape, marital rape, sexual harassment, and polygamy are also common (Deribe et al., 2012; Deyessa et al., 1998; Holden and Tefera, 2007).

Acknowledging this issue, the Federal Government of Ethiopia has adopted legal and policy frameworks to address gender-based violence. Institutional structures, including specialized units dedicated to addressing gender-based violence, have been established at various government levels. However, given the deeply rooted cultural traditions and religious beliefs, the problem remains pervasive (Berhane, 2005; WHO, 2021).

5. Struggles over natural resources

5.1. Power and authority at the societal level

The establishment of a national park in southern Ethiopia, an area where transhumance has long been a strategy for exploiting natural resources, led to restricted access to these resources, causing hardship for both women and men. According to the life stories of the Guji and Koore people, access to land in the region was open and free during the imperial regime. Both the Guji and Koore communities assert ownership of the land based on their claims of being the original occupants. The following quote illustrates how people express their grievances about the land they lost due to the park's creation and the resulting hardships:

When our land was taken by the government to create a park, diseases came, and we lost a lot of cattle, so we had to start cultivating. Before the establishment of the park, land was free for grazing, and we had to pay a small annual fee. During the Derg regime, things became very difficult.
(A.R.¹, Guji man, 2 August 2013; case 5 in Appendix).

When the park was created, both the Guji and Koore people were resettled to areas outside the park that they considered unsuitable. The following quotes reveal the extent of the

¹ We use a code for names of people to protect informants' privacy; the date indicates when the interview took place.

suffering. Consequently, after the overthrow of the *Derg* regime, both the Guji and Koore communities swiftly returned to the park:

In the place they forced us to live, most of the elderly people succumbed to diseases. From my age group, only my friend and I survived. After the fall of the Derg, we decided to return to this place because it offers a healthier living environment and an abundance of water for our livestock.
(A.R., Guji man, 2 August 2013).

We lost all the produce from the land in the park when we returned after the fall of the Derg, but the area had already been occupied by the Guji. So, we had to find other land for cultivation.
(A.M., Koore woman, 5 August 2013).

The eviction of approximately 9,000 people from Nechisar National Park in 2004, during which 463 houses were set on fire, sparked international outrage and was widely reported as a violation of human rights (Adams & Hutton, 2007; Blonk, 2008; Brockington & Igoe, 2006).

A comparable evolution in terms of access to natural resources and violence can be noted in relation to firewood collection. According to elderly firewood collectors, during both the imperial and the *Derg* regime, collecting firewood in the park was nearly impossible. Also, in those days, the price of firewood was very low because the *Derg* had a system of providing it from plantation forests. However, as the town expanded, firewood from plantation forests could no longer meet the demand. Firewood collectors resorted to covertly entering the park, often at night, out of fear of being caught. The following quote illustrates that when caught, firewood collectors are often abused:

During the Derg regime, there was enough wood, and we were selling it cheaply. Nowadays, when park guards catch us, they abuse us and burn the wood. Still, we have no other choice but to come back. We would rather get beaten up by the guards than suffer hunger. Still, some guards allow us to collect and transport wood.
(Z.W., woman firewood collector, 2 Sep 2013).

During the imperial regime², fishing was a marginal activity. However, with the strong increase in the urban population, there is now a great demand for fish. This relatively new market opportunity attracted people to settle in town or nearby villages. During both the imperial and the *Derg* regimes, only licensed members of the main fish cooperative³ could fish. Nowadays, even though it is, in principle, restricted to cooperative members, unlicensed independent fishermen also fish. Attempts to control fishing during the *Derg*, as well as during the period of African Parks, led to violent actions against independent fishermen and the destruction of their belongings.

Environmental justice is frequently framed along the lines of distribution, procedure, and recognition (Martin *et al.*, 2016). The above cases all illustrate how local people have heavily lost in terms of both distribution and procedure, as they were never involved in decisions concerning the creation and management of the park. Moreover, giving an Amharic name to the park, "Nechisar," referring to the grasslands turning white in the dry season, neglected to recognize the local people's ties to the land. This act of toponymic imperialism exemplifies how naming practices can impose state authority and culture over local peoples' identities and histories. The entire process of creating a national park clearly extends far beyond the stated aim of nature conservation and should also be seen as a means of imposing state authority over both people and land.

5.2. Power and authority at individual level

In our case study area, access rights to natural resources are strongly influenced by 'customary' rules, even though Ethiopia's statutory laws aim at giving equal rights to women and men. As the case of J.A. (case 1 in Appendix) illustrates, women do not normally own resources such as land and livestock. For example, in general Guji women do not own cattle⁴,

² From only 3000 inhabitants in 1969, Arba Minch town grew to ca 30,000 in 1990 and in 2015 the population was estimated to be 142,900 (<http://www.citypopulation.de/Ethiopia.html>).

³ The Arba Minch fish cooperative association is the oldest cooperative and was established in 1974, in the first year of the *Derg* regime.

⁴ Though Bedane (2021) asserts that Guji women can own cattle, he also explains that such ownership is normally limited as these animals remain under the control of their husbands or their husbands' families.

but they are in charge of milking and selling dairy products. Still, the testimony of J.A. illustrates that women can manage the income from these products independently and can participate in a rotating saving and credit system. However, access to agricultural land is controlled by men. The following quote illustrates how a widow, even though she did not retain ownership of the land, still kept the usufruct rights through her sons:

I have five children, but their father died when they were small. I have suffered a lot and lost many things after his death. For many years, I faced problems until the children were big enough to help on the farm. Now I'm doing well as my children are plowing their father's land, and the cattle are in good condition. I'm living with the wives of my two sons, and I am having a happy life. (B.F., Guji woman, July 2013).

Similarly, Koore women do not normally own farmland either, but they can sell farm produce such as ensente⁵ and coffee. The testimony of Z.K. (case 2 in Appendix) illustrates that some women can also own a cow. Another Koore widow kept the ownership of the house after the death of her husband together with the plot of land on which it was built.

The case of Z.W. (case 3 in Appendix) illustrates how she got involved in the trade of collecting firewood after moving to town with her husband, who had lost his farmland. From her testimony, it can be understood that collecting firewood has the advantage of not requiring any investment unlike for example selling alcoholic drinks.

Women are not directly involved in fishing, but widows of members of the main cooperative (A.A., case 4 in Appendix) do keep the fishing equipment of their husbands. They can then indirectly be involved in fishing by employing a male assistant.

These individual experiences reflect broader societal norms and injustices, showing how deeply embedded cultural practices govern access to resources. Although there are marked cultural differences between the four groups of people – defined by ethnic identity and type of natural resources use – women's access rights to natural resources follow a very similar

⁵ Ensete, also known as wild or false banana (*Ensete ventricosum* (Welw.) Cheesman), is grown and cultivated both for its starchy bulb and its fibers.

pattern. Despite decades of government policies aimed at attenuating customary rules, these rules prevail in southern Ethiopia, much like what has been reported for northern Ethiopia (Lenaerts *et al.*, 2013; Segers *et al.*, 2010). Women usually do not own livestock while it is their task to milk and sell dairy products; women only retain usufruct rights to agricultural land through their husbands, or in the case of widows through their sons. Similarly, none of the widows nor any of the divorcees in our case study got agricultural land from either parents or brothers. Fishing is only done by men, and widows of members of the main cooperative can only have some fishing rights indirectly by employing a male assistant. Relying on firewood as a source of income is only done by the poorest, and mostly women, who then have to face male guards.

5.3. Violence against women

In addition to the suffering resulting from the violent actions linked to the evictions of the park, the testimonies provided by the women shed light on the widespread domestic violence they endure. Seven out of the 19 women spontaneously revealed that they had been forced into marriage. As teenage girls, they were abducted and subjected to sexual assault, often when fetching water. Subsequently, these cases were ‘settled’ with their fathers, mediated by elderly men, and the girls were forced to marry their assailants. The oral testimonies also revealed the prevalence of domestic violence against women. For example, all Guji women reported being subjected to physical abuse by their husbands almost daily. The principal author, during an overnight stay with a Guji family, witnessed the husband becoming violent towards his wife over allegations of her returning late from the market. The following quote from a Guji woman indicates that their situation improved after converting to Protestantism:

I am happy now, in my life things have changed. In the past, my husband used to beat me every day without any reason. But since we became religious and were converted by the missionaries [to Protestantism], he doesn't do this anymore. We have learned a lot from them [the missionaries], and we now live together peacefully.
(J.A., Guji woman, July 2013, case 1 in Appendix).

One particularly poignant testimony comes from Z.K. (case 2 in Appendix). She had to interrupt her primary education as her father forced her into marriage. She attempted to escape this fate by running away to Arba Minch town, but she was brought back. Nowadays, she is a district gender officer, working to reduce cases of rape, forced marriage, and polygamy, and to promote women's rights to inheritance and ownership of resources. Despite the widespread violence against women, there are also examples of resistance. The life story of Z.K. is particularly encouraging, as she is now a gender district officer as part of a government initiative to promote gender equality.

The firewood collectors were all living in precarious situations in Arba Minch but originated from nearby villages. The first woman (Z.W., case 3 in Appendix) was a widow who came to live in the town with her husband, whom she was forced to marry after he had raped her. They came to town when her husband had lost his land, in a village outside the park, during the *Derg* regime. The second woman was a divorcee who had left her abusive husband. The third one fled from her village because of her brother mistreating her after their parents died. She got married in town, but her husband's salary, working as a labourer at a commercial farm, is insufficient. The fourth one is also married, but her husband is blind and depends on her. The fifth one is a student from a poor family that cannot support her.

The widows of the fishermen did not mention having been victims of violence or having been abused by their husbands. The biggest challenge they face is when assistant fishermen cheat them by underreporting fish catches or inflating the maintenance and repair costs of the fishing gear. Although according to the cooperative's rules, widows are entitled to the largest share of fish catches, they complained that their male assistants were getting the largest share (case 4 in Appendix).

In line with earlier findings in Ethiopia (Erulkar, 2013; Kedir & Admasachew, 2010), the testimonies we recorded reveal that domestic violence against women, including the abduction of young girls for marriage, early marriage against their wishes, rape, and physical assault of girls, is still very common in southern Ethiopia. However, our findings contradict Debsu (2009), who claims that customary rules provide Guji women with strong protection from mistreatment by husbands and their clan members. Among our interviewees, only women who converted to Protestantism reported experiencing less domestic violence.

Furthermore, as our data was primarily collected to study people's relations with the park rather than violence against women, it is remarkable how frequently acts of violence were spontaneously reported. Additionally, some forms of violence, especially those considered 'normal' within the local socio-cultural context, such as genital mutilation, may not have been reported.

The cases bring to light the pervasive nature of domestic violence against women living in and around Nechisar National Park. As the patterns of violence manifest across the four groups of natural resource users, our observations align with the feminist argument that such violence can be seen as a mechanism to maintain male dominance over access to natural resources (Riger & Krieglstein, 2000). Additionally, men may feel emboldened to misbehave as they control access to these resources, aligning with power dynamics and resource control theories in feminist economics (Agarwal, 1997). Conversely, stronger marital property rights for women have been shown to correlate with lower levels of partner violence (Anderson, 2021). The case of the firewood collector, who fled her village due to violence from her brother, serves as a clear example. In contrast, the wives of fishermen did not report any violence from their husbands. However, as all of them are widows, they may have refrained from speaking negatively about deceased individuals. Nonetheless, within the cooperative, they encounter gender-based restrictions and discrimination. They are denied the right to fish themselves and are relegated to menial jobs within the cooperative or are taken advantage of by male assistants.

6. Gender matters in conservation

As stated by Brockington et al. (2008: 84), "[i]f we want conservation practice that is more just, then we have to understand what sustains injustice." The case of Nechisar National Park illustrates the necessity of comprehending the mechanism of access to natural resources, both at the societal and individual levels, to understand the injustices inflicted on local people. Various struggles over access to these resources have resulted in social, ecological, and individual injustices.

First, at the societal level, although the setting aside of land for nature conservation was principally motivated by the protection of the endangered Swayne's hartebeest akin to other conservation areas in Africa, the establishment of the park also served to assert state power and authority over both people and land (King, 2010; Neumann, 1997; Peluso & Lund, 2011). During the *Derg* regime, the state authority was enforced with strong military power, and conservation efforts in Nechisar National Park were described as being managed "with exceptional efficacy, [resulting in] very little damaging human activity in regularly patrolled areas; [...] only minor infringements were noted" (Duckworth *et al.*, 1992). However, this strict conservation approach led to violent conflicts that undermined long-term conservation goals: today, the population of Swayne's hartebeest has dwindled, and the once-iconic grasslands of the plains are severely degraded (Shibru *et al.*, 2020; Tsegaye *et al.*, 2017). The decline of this endemic antelope and the degradation of the grasslands constitute ecological injustices. Furthermore, under the current ethnic-based federal political regime, the park became entangled in ethno-regional politics, exacerbating struggles over natural resources (Bedane *et al.*, 2020). At this level, men dominate past and ongoing conflicts, while women bear the consequences.

Second, at the individual level, the impact of the park's creation on women's livelihoods has never been adequately considered. In southern Ethiopia, access to the most economically valuable natural resources – livestock, land, forests, and fisheries – remains under the control of men. The widespread violence against women can be viewed as a mechanism that reinforces male dominance over these resources. These individual injustices are deeply rooted in and perpetuate broader societal structures of male dominance and social injustice. In a context where women often fall victim to domestic violence, people's eviction from the park and the ensuing restrictions on resource access heightened women's vulnerability to further abuse and violence.

Women's economic independence hinges on the ability to move freely to rural markets or towns to engage in trade, including dairy products, ensete, coffee, and alcoholic beverages, as well as for gathering firewood. However, their mobility was significantly restricted during periods when access to the park and its natural resources was strictly enforced. It is doubtful whether government authorities and conservation agencies, almost exclusively staffed by

men, understood the extent to which the park's establishment exacerbated challenges for women.

The literature on 'people and parks,' primarily focused on ecological and societal-level injustices, appears to have neglected the profound impacts the establishment of parks can have on women. Through our analysis of gender relations and access rights to natural resources, we have uncovered complex social dynamics that affect local communities and conservation initiatives alike. Understanding and addressing these issues are crucial for conservationists aiming to promote sustainable practices that uphold local rights, advance gender equality, and mitigate potential conflicts stemming from resource management strategies. By integrating gender-sensitive approaches into conservation policies and practices, conservationists can enhance the effectiveness and inclusivity of their efforts, thereby contributing to environmental sustainability and social justice. Recognizing these gender inequalities and injustices should be a top priority for policymakers and conservation agencies.

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Appendix: Oral testimonies of four women and two men

Case 1 – Guji woman (J.A. 31 July 2013)

My name is J.A. I'm 45 years old. My father and mother died when I was still a child. I grew up with my uncle. I served them by making coffee, cooking food, fetching water. One day I was going to the river to fetch water, then my [current] husband forced me and took me to his house to marry him. I was married by force but after the case was settled through the mediation of elderly men, as the culture demands, I started to prepare food and take all responsibilities expected of a wife. In the past things were very difficult. There was no grain milling machine. I always had to grind manually using traditional stone mills, but now there is a grinding machine in our area.

When I was child I was herding cattle in the plain. Then when I was getting older they stopped me doing so. I didn't have direct relation with the land but my husband produce cereals [i.e. maize, sorghum]. We manage and use it together. He inherited the land from his father and after we married, he got land in a place called Tselkea. Now we are using that land. We have eight children, three girls and my husband is supposed to give cattle and land to the five boys. We have two houses, one in the park and one in the highlands. During the dry season we live here [in the park], in the wet season we move to a place called Medo in the highlands. In the dry season we prefer to live in the park; that is why now I'm here. Our main source of income is from livestock, cultivation and some honey but our cattle is really the most important. We use them for our own consumption and I sell milk and dairy products and with which I buy clothes, medicine and other items. I may get 1000 to 2000 Birr from the rotating saving and credit association (ROSCA). But I don't really know how much money I'm making monthly. Sometimes my husband will sell an ox and we use the money for the wedding ceremony for our children. I am happy now, in my life things have changed. In the past my husband used to beat me every day without any reason, or when I was going to the market when I would get home, he used to say "why are you late?". But now we became religious, and were converted by the missionaries [to Protestantism]. We have learned a lot from them and we now live together peacefully.

Case 2 – Koore woman (Z.K. 6 August 2013)

My name is Z.K, I am 36 years old. I went to school up to grade six then my family forced me to stop my education and asked me to marry. I refused and I wanted to continue my schooling, but I didn't succeed. My father wanted to force me to marry so I ran away to hide in Arba Minch town. However, he came to town and took me back with him. Finally, I accepted the marriage. We live mainly from farming and we have some cattle. We got the land from the parents of my husband and we also bought some land. Some of our land is in the park and we really need that land because it is much more productive. If we would not be cultivating the land in the park we would really face difficulties to live.

I was elected by the district as the gender officer in the district, and so I am responsible for dealing with the gender issues of the area. The idea is to reduce or to stop rape, to stop men to marry more than one woman and to stop forced marriage. In addition, we teach people that women have get equal rights of ownership of resources, and equal rights to inherit. It is actually a difficult work but I am struggling to make a change. I am trying to form groups of five women, whereby one woman in each group has the task to teach these things to her group members. We are already seeing some changes. Experts [from the government's gender office] came to share their experience with us and taught us how to bring changes on women rights. If this training of women groups can go on, I have good hope to see more changes in the near future. Personally, I got one cow from my father and I can manage all of the resources that we have with my husband equally.

Case 3 – Firewood collectors' woman (Z.W. 2 Sep 2013)

My name is Z.W. I am around 65 years old. My parents were farmers and when I was living with them I helped them doing household routines. I have seven children: four daughters and three sons. My man first raped me and latter arranged with my family to marry me. My husband was a farmer but he lost his land and we moved to Arba Minch. I started collecting firewood and selling local alcoholic drinks. During the Derg regime there was enough wood and we were selling it cheaply like 10 cents for a load. But in those days' things were also cheaper, we used to buy sweet potato for food. Later, I stopped making the drinks, as the

investments made it not profitable anymore. Then, my only source of income was selling firewood. When guards caught us they would abuse us and burn the wood. Still we had no other choice but to go back to those places. Rather than suffering hunger we would get beaten up by the guards. There are also guards that allow us to collect the wood. Some of my children are now living on their own others are still with me. In the past we didn't need to go as far as today to find wood. I also feel that the forest is being destroyed but to survive we have to do this work.

I now stopped collecting firewood because the wife of one of my son died and I am now looking after his children. Now I also weave cotton for making clothes. I always feel that big trees shouldn't be cut and destroyed. There is a proverb which says "it is good to have person becoming old and trees getting big because the longer a person lives the more children he may get, the bigger a tree the more it will produce seeds and shadow". It is good if people can get other work than collecting wood, not only for the sake of the forest but also for their own safety.

Case 4 – Widow of a fisherman (A.A. 28 August 2013)

My name is A.A. I am 40 years old. My parents were farmers. When I heard about job opportunities in Arba Minch I left my place and moved to town. My first job was harvesting cotton at the government's cotton farm. Then I got married. My husband was a fisherman and was a member of the cooperative. At first he was working without nets, using only traditional equipment [spears]. Later he got fishing nets.

I have four children two of them have finished their education and have their own jobs. The two others are still living with me. My husband was killed by a crocodile while fishing. When this happened, I had three children and I was pregnant with the fourth one. Then I started selling onions, salt and the like on the market just to get money, no matter how little I was getting. Life was really hard at that time. The fish cooperative offered me to work as a cleaner and so to be employed by the cooperative, as a house cleaner but also for cleaning fish and storing the fish in the refrigerator. I served the cooperative for six years getting paid only 75 Birr per month. At that time this was sufficient, because things were very cheap, for

example one quintal of maize was just 30 Birr. I didn't have problems to get enough food, but to buy clothes was difficult. After working for six years as a cleaner, I started working in the kitchen of the restaurant of the cooperative. Then I earned 120 Birr per month and could save some money to buy nets and other fishing equipment. Then I started hiring a man who could fish so now I am sharing with him the revenues equally.

Now my salary for preparing food in the restaurant is 250 Birr per month. Sometimes I will get 300 to 500 Birr [per month] from the fishing. If I would follow the rules of the cooperative, my fish assistant would get per fish type a certain percentage of the price. But, as I am woman I cannot join him on the lake to work with him, so I agreed to pay him more than required by the rules, and we agreed to share the income equally.

Case 5 – Guji man (A.R. 2 August 2013)

My name is A.R I am approximately 120 years old⁶. During the war of Italy, I was a very young boy and there still was a very dense forest by that time. I got married only to one wife and I have ten children. We had large number of cattle. We didn't know how to cultivate the land because we mainly depended on cattle.

When our land was taken by the government to create a park, diseases came and we lost a lot of cattle and so we had to start cultivating. Before the establishment of the park, land was free for grazing only we had to pay a little fee annually. During the Derg regime things became very difficult as we were not allowed to move anymore. In the wet season cattle can die from the diseases like *aba shenga*, *aba gora*, *galey*. Therefore [before being resettled] we were living in two different places: one place in the park, one in the Amaro Mountains. We were staying in the park till the dry season harvest then we were going back to our fields in the mountains In the place they forced us to live [during the *Derg*] most of the elderly people died from diseases; from my age group my friend and I are the only two who survived. After the Derg, we decided to come back to this place because it is healthier place to live and

⁶ Though the gentleman claimed to be 120 years old, cross-referencing with historical events indicates that he must be between 80 and 85 years old.

there is plenty of water for our cattle. Still, the place has changed. There are many more shrubs where there used to be grasses and people live now close to each other, which creates stress on land and wildlife. There used to be many wild animals but they died from the *gandi* disease just as the cattle did. The milk and milk products are for home consumption and for sale for which my wife is in charge of. The land is registered in my name, but we use it together. When I get money I will buy whatever my wife asks. When we don't have enough cereals, we "bleed a cow" and use its blood. My sons inherited my land and I thought them how to cultivate it. My daughters, as long as they were living with us "were eating whatever they liked", but this stopped once they got married.

Case 6 – Koore man (A.G. 5 August 2013)

My name is A.G. I was young during the war with Italy. I was born in Amhara region in the place named by Menz. During the Italian war, I married a widow. She was my first wife but I married 11 other women among which only two gave birth. I got 17 children twelve of them male, and five are still alive. They inherited land from me and I also built houses for each of them. In the past there were more wild animal species like elephants, giraffes and cheetahs, but they disappeared due to hunting. Before the establishment of the park, hunting was done but not for eating. A successful hunter would be considered a hero, and he would get a special name. He would be highly respected by the community and when he dies, he would get a special funeral.

During the imperial regime, we were using wood from [what is now] the park for house construction. The traditional leader (*checkashum*) was allowed to cultivate in the park. He was also paid by the government. I am living from cultivation, I don't have many cows, only a few for own consumption [of milk] and for ploughing. In former times we used to grow sorghum and only later started growing maize; always for own consumption. So we don't know how much money we actually earn from it. A woman is not allowed to own land but when the husband dies she can manage it until her children become skilled enough to cultivate the land. Women are entitled to produce enset [false banana (*Ensete ventricosum* (Welw.) Cheesman)], preparing food, preparing the cotton before the waving, collecting firewood, fetching water and the like. It is up to men to cultivate the land and to build

houses. Kore people do not eat meat of wild animals. Only pottery makers are used to eat wild meat. Some animals like porcupine are used as/for medicine.

We lost our farmlands where we were growing banana, sugarcane, enset, maize, coffee and mango due to the park establishment. There were people living in the park; they also lost their homes. Guji people did not cultivate land, they only move with cattle from one place to another. Sometimes they exchange enset or cereals with milk. Even they did not know cultivation by that time.

On the other hand, we Kore people don't eat meat. Even children if they eat meat they used to wash their body by using leaves to change their smell before they get back home. But now they adapted to eat so hunting is spread over the area which is bad for wild animal. In the past there was a flat plain which was full of grass but now it is covered by woody plants (encroaches woody plants) this is because of livestock. The cattle eat acacia species from other places and the seed will not be digested in their stomach but dropped with their dung which starts to germinate and grow on the plane causing woody species encroachment.