

## **Gender Awareness in European Alpine Protected-Area Management: Achievements, Shortcomings, and the Way Forward**

Author: Schmitt, Mathilde

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# Gender Awareness in European Alpine Protected-Area Management

## Achievements, Shortcomings, and the Way Forward

Mathilde Schmitt

mathilde.schmitt@oeaw.ac.at

Austrian Academy of Sciences, Institute for Interdisciplinary Mountain Research, Technikerstraße 21a, ICT, A-6020 Innsbruck, Austria

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*When the first protected areas in the European Alps were established as national parks, biocentric ideas of nature protection and research-oriented ecological approaches were at the heart of these efforts, and gender issues were not considered. With the paradigm shift toward integrative biodiversity politics, gender issues gained significance. In addition, the European Commission Women's Charta 2010, on building a gender perspective into all policies in accordance with the European theme "united in diversity," required the integration of gender considerations into regional development, including protected areas. Based on a document analysis, an online survey, qualitative interviews, and focus group*

*discussions, this article shows how widely gender mainstreaming is accepted and in which aspects of protected mountain areas gender perspectives are already considered important. Inspired by concepts from gender research and available options for regional (mountain) development, new items are recommended for a mountain agenda.*

**Keywords:** Protected area; gender; sustainable development; paradigm shift; societal aspects.

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## Introduction

As early as 1998 the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN) announced a gender commitment, calling for: "the promotion of equity and equality as a crucial factor for environmental sustainability and an integral part of all conservation efforts. ... Only with a gender perspective can a complete picture of human relationships and ecosystems be built up" (Cristina et al 1998: 1). In 2005 "the veritable role of gender equity in the management and conservation of protected areas" was emphasized, and further, "Gender equity is mentioned as an important emerging issue for the 21st century to achieve equitable benefit sharing and more effective governance systems" (Huber et al 2013: 29). This is documented in the proceedings of the World Park Congress (IUCN 2005). Since then the IUCN global senior gender adviser has been conducting a series of activities (eg, training delegates and developing manuals) to ensure that gender considerations are fully integrated in climate change and biodiversity policies (IUCN 2013).

Since the 1992 Conference for Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro, which had an enormous impact on a wide range of mountain initiatives at various levels (Messerli 2012), it has been widely acknowledged that "women have a vital role in environmental management and development" (United Nations 1992: Principle 20); therefore, their full participation is essential for achieving sustainable development in mountains. But 20 years later, a study still called for the inclusion of gender issues and analysis in important

discussions, negotiations, policy-making, and institutions that work for equitable mountain development. As in other contexts, it stressed the importance of acknowledging women as "capable, knowledgeable agents who adapt to climate change and ensure sustainable livelihoods and environments" (Khadka and Verma 2012: 48; see also Verma 2014, in this issue).

Gender equity measures were put on the agenda of the European Union (EU) structural fund programs and projects in 1996, in parallel with the Cork Conference, which highlighted the importance of rural areas (which include mountain regions) and the need to promote their development. The first evaluation of the EU structural funds' impact in 2002 found only limited initial steps toward the integration of equal opportunity in regional management (Oedl-Wieser 2004: 12 f). The midterm review of the Austrian Programme for the Development of Rural Areas 2007–2013 revealed that many of the specific problems of rural mountain areas are still not recognized in their gender-specific dimensions (Oedl-Wieser 2011). The same is true for the Austrian national park strategy, published in 2010, which points out development paths for the national parks without any consideration of gender issues (BMLFUW 2010).

In spite of the EU legislative commitment and the fact that in many local civil society groups and initiatives women are very active members (Wiesinger 2008), equal opportunities for men and women have been only poorly realized in the various development programs. It remains necessary to call for the integration of gender issues into sustainable regional development as envisaged in the

European Commission Women's Charta 2010 (European Commission 2010) on building a gender perspective into all policies in accordance with the European theme "united in diversity." This means that measures that do justice to the different interests of men and women and that support equal opportunity also need to be integrated into the concepts of protected Alpine areas.

The many facets of gender-specific issues in protected mountain areas make it necessary to look into a number of different research areas. Gender themes in mountain research have so far been mainly taken up in the context of the so-called developing countries. In European gender research, studies exist on sustainability and on regional development, but only occasionally with a reference to Alpine areas. This article looks at the debate about protected areas in terms of the extent to which gender can play a role and presents the results of a transdisciplinary investigation on this topic, followed by recommendations of ways to integrate gender-equitable development options in future mountain research and governance.

## Methodology

To help identify topics related to protected mountain areas that should be handled in a gender-specific way, between 2010 and 2013 we carried out an analysis of relevant publications; we also conducted qualitative interviews and an online survey with people involved in Alpine protected areas management and research using a semistandardized questionnaire and spot checks of protected area websites. Finally, we discussed the results with focus groups.

For the survey we approached 150 protected areas (national parks, biosphere reserves, nature parks, regional parks, and United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO] World Natural Heritages sites) by email. We had a fairly good rate of return (65%; mainly from Austria and Italy), but not all questionnaires were completed fully. Therefore, we decided to present our results in a qualitative rather than quantitative way.

## The changing significance of gender

The establishment of the first protected areas in the European Alps (as national parks) in the 20th century was based on biocentric ideas of nature protection and research-oriented ecological approaches; gender issues played no role. Gender has gained importance with the paradigm shift toward integrative biodiversity politics, which includes the following:

- A focus on species diversity as well as on regional development (Mose and Weixlbaumer 2003)
- A shift from conservation to ongoing development of cultural landscapes in an environmentally and socially

acceptable manner with adequate options for future generations (Lange 2005)

- Protected areas "utilization and maintenance in accordance with the conservation aims and a matching regional economy" (Hammer et al 2012: 7)

This new understanding reflects the awareness that national parks not only preserve untouched natural areas but also transform cultural landscapes into new types of use. Protected areas are to become models of sustainable regional development with an increasing focus on actors, participation, and the general public.

The year 1995 marked a milestone in putting humans and their needs into the center of protected area development, when UNESCO's Seville Strategy and Seville Guidelines provided a solid base for such a rethinking. At the political, research, and management levels, however, the concept is only slowly gaining ground. As late as 2007, Ingo Mose underlined that "the present picture of protected areas (still) appears rather diffuse, if not confusing" (Mose 2007: XVI).

The paradigm shift to integrative biodiversity politics requires renegotiating the symbolic meaning and the social responsibility of protected areas, as Kupper (2008) pointed out for national parks. When we negotiate how we want to live under changing global conditions, gender aspects should also play a role as studies on life quality have revealed (for the Alpine region, eg, Keller 2009). Gender issues, however, are still not being taken up.

Looking at the aforementioned and other relevant publications on protected areas and at *eco.mont*, the *Journal on Protected Mountain Areas Research and Management* (<http://www.oecaw.ac.at/ecomont/>), published since 2009, we find authors striving for a comprehensive view of the issues of protected areas in mountain regions. Unlike mountain research as a whole, the focus is not biased by biophysical issues. But even where one might expect it—in social science, economics, or planning-related articles—there is little discussion of how protected-area-related choices may affect men and women differently. Nor are there any references in these publications to various journal articles and special issues about mountain women and development (eg *Mountain Research and Development*, Special Issue 2002; Khadka and Verma 2012; Rudaz and Debarbieux 2012). Generally, they focus on protected areas in developing countries. The debates seem to run independently of each other. A recent work on transcultural exchange of knowledge in protected areas also underlines that "[i]n general, the topic of gender and knowledge management proves to be relevant for most fields of activity but has been addressed inadequately so far. It should be integrated into the European concept as well" (Huber et al 2013: 17).

Although the importance of gender equality for sustainable development is widely recognized in European politics, it is rarely taken up as a research topic

or as a guideline for regional initiatives in the Alps. The awareness of the topic leads to the postulated but not practiced integration of gender equality issues.

The Alpine Space Programme is the main transnational cooperation to promote regional development in the Alps in a sustainable way. Its projects and conferences can be seen as role models with special attention to “the perspectives of equal opportunities, gender mainstreaming and sustainable development,” according to its “operational program” (Alpine Space 2007–2013a: 5). A study of this program’s website reveals that gender issues are still not widely discussed. Gender mainstreaming is usually integrated as a work package into the project plans, but it is hard to find gender-specific results in the presentations and discussions, for example at the forum Coping with Demographic Change (Alpine Space 2007–2013b).

In other institutional contexts, the focus so far has been on balancing ecological and socioeconomic monitoring, but this does not include gender issues. Nor do documents and declarations of the International Scientific Committee on Research in the Alps (ISCAR), or those of the Global Change and the World’s Mountains Conference in Perth 2010, include such a focus. “Together with the clearly identified need for more research into social systems and interactions between social and ecological systems, this calls for changes in the composition of the mountain research community and a new research paradigm. Although the mountain research community possesses a great deal of social capital, it should urgently be complemented with more social and political scientists, as well as mountain stakeholders, who should be involved at all stages of research” (Björnsen Gurung et al 2012: 53).

The integration of sociocultural dimensions into concepts of sustainable regional development and research are called for, but gender as an analytical category is usually missing. Reflection about gender seems absent from conclusions such as “more information regarding societal aspects is needed” or “integrated monitoring is required to fulfill the integrated approach of sustainable development in biosphere reserves” (Stoll-Kleemann 2011: 2 at the ISCAR conference; see also Stoll-Kleemann and Welp 2008).

Methodologically, research projects with participatory approaches are more likely to take gender perspectives into account. It is quite difficult to find enough women to participate (Moser 2009: 115; Borsdorf 2010: 167). Therefore, the researchers’ awareness of gender-specific differences is even more important to promote a strong involvement of all different groups of local people and actors of biosphere reserve administrations.

## Results of the mixed methods research

How widely is gender mainstreaming accepted, and in which aspects of protected mountain areas are gender perspectives already considered important? Results from

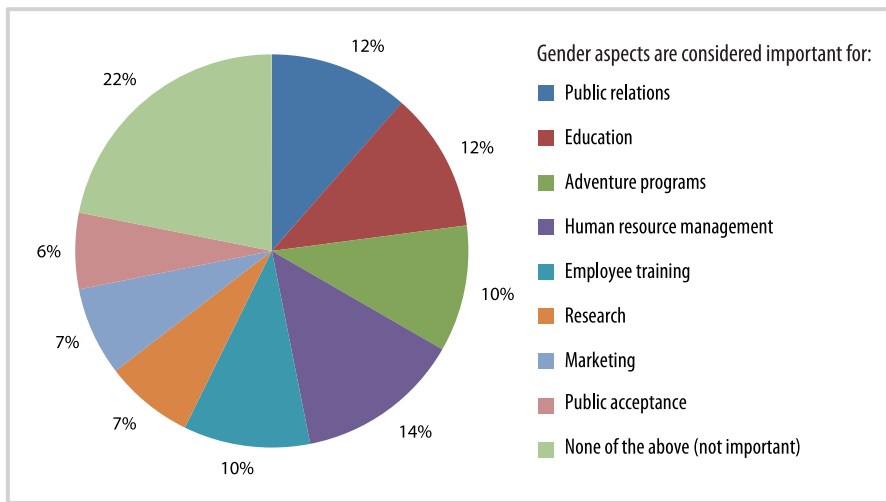
our online survey, qualitative interviews, and focus groups suggest the following:

- Gender-specific visitor monitoring and research results from master’s and PhD theses exist, but they are not used in decisions about day-to-day operations; practitioners do not work with these numbers.
- If gender mainstreaming measures have been realized (almost half of the interviewees reported such measures), these have been mainly in human resource management, that is, in terms of women’s employment. An interesting gender-specific phenomenon is the need for male-dominated boards, with chairmen, mayors, farmers’ association representatives, and the like, to work with an increasing number of well-educated female managers of protected areas.
- The personnel structure of Alpine protected areas is often male-dominated (in Switzerland more than in Austria and Italy). A common pattern is men as leaders and women as deputies. Women seem to be welcome in the areas of public relations and education.
- Very few employees or volunteers are trained in gender-specific issues.
- Gender issues are considered important for quite diverse spheres of activity (Figure 1). The wide range of answers with an almost balanced distribution is striking. We do not know if these answers reflect equal-opportunity rhetoric or the respondents’ convictions. The literature suggests that effects of social desirability are less pronounced in online surveys than in face-to-face or telephone interviews (Taddicken 2009: 96).

Few respondents spoke of concrete plans to implement gender mainstreaming projects; one said: “It would be possible to do more.” Other survey participants, both men and women, concluded that the management of their protected area faced financial problems that were more urgent than gender issues. When asked which future developments they wished for their protected area, many respondents mentioned better acceptance by local people, more support from the public, and more financial and personnel resources. It appears that many of them face a daily struggle to find enough money to keep the activities of the protected area going.

An important issue mentioned in the survey and the qualitative interviews was the lack of time in the day-to-day schedule to deal with new ideas like gender mainstreaming. Based on her own experience, a female manager said this could be one of the reasons why there is still a lot of catching up to do with regard to gender perspectives in protected areas. Another was interested in thinking about integrating gender even though he believes that gender is not a top priority in a nature park. A few women managers of protected areas mentioned that they considered gender an important topic but did not find an opportunity to address it in their professional environment.

**FIGURE 1** Gender-inclusive options for sustainable development in Alpine protected areas mentioned by people involved with Alpine protected area management (n = 96).



The discussion that follows combines three perspectives—policy, research, and management—to examine the gender-inclusive options for sustainable development in Alpine protected areas and draw conclusions for a related mountain agenda.

## Discussion

The international gender commitments and the paradigm shift toward integrative biodiversity politics open up the possibility of considering social and cultural aspects in general and gender perspectives in particular within regional and protected-area development (see also Molden et al 2014, in this issue). The findings presented earlier clearly indicate that many practitioners in Alpine protected areas are open to greater consideration of gender issues but see this as optional rather than as a requirement. In order to integrate gender-specific issues systematically, it is necessary to raise awareness of the wider implications of gender perspectives or the lack of them. We think transdisciplinary surveys like this one are the first step in confronting people with the gender issue.

Wetterer (2009) categorized three types of gender knowledge—gender expertise, feminist theory, and the everyday knowledge of gender—which correspond to different constellations of social practice. “Nowadays gender experts, feminist theorists and women (and men) in the street do not only know very different things about gender; they also consider rather different things as important and obviously use very different ‘quality criteria’ when they evaluate what is reliable and worth knowing. Gender equality politics currently takes place between the priorities of different types of gender knowledge” (Wetterer 2009: 46; translation by the author). Assuming that the relationship between human beings

and their environment depends on their specific engagement with nature through work, adventure, or recreation, there still exist relations with protected areas, not exclusively gender specific, that are shaped by different encounters with nature in childhood as the result of different social attributions and living arrangements of men and women, independently of any gender mainstreaming efforts. Transferring these perceptions to research, policy, and management of protected areas, the people involved might follow different priorities in exercising the new paradigm of integrative biodiversity politics (which still has to be proven empirically). It can be expected that, depending on their own gender experience, social status, and site of influence, the people in charge of protected areas will differ greatly in the importance they ascribe to integrating the gender question into regional development and into research about it.

Considering the increasing awareness of the importance of local and experience-based knowledge, equal treatment of the various forms of knowledge must be promoted. This will enhance the appreciation of knowledge plurality and sensitize people to the changing value of knowledge across times and environments. Up to now, gender mainstreaming in protected areas has settled for gender equality by numbers: to employ women without considering their perspective. As long as the people involved do not fully appreciate gender equality, the concepts and politics of protected areas will not be tailored to gender justice in local participation and decision-making.

A Norwegian study found “that local participation within the context of conservation issues ignores policies and legislation on gender equality” (Svarstad et al 2006: 48). That is even more interesting as Norway, like other



Nordic countries, is a role model not only for gender equality but also for integrating the issues of gender equality and natural resources: “More than in any other country, it would be reasonable to expect that in Norway gender equality is taken seriously in policy-making with regard to the environment. Gro Harlem Brundtland pointed to the necessity of doing this in the *Brundtland Report* (WCED 1987). One year earlier, Brundtland had turned international attention to gender equality in Norway when, as Prime Minister, she appointed a ‘women’s government’ with 8 women of a total of 18 cabinet members” (Svarstad et al 2006: 49).

For the protected areas in the Alps, an article summarizing societal research perspectives on protected areas in Europe (Hammer et al 2012) demonstrates that gender perspectives are not emphatically enforced. We do not know if they were ignored, as in Norway, or just unconsciously forgotten. But can we afford, following Svarstad and colleagues, not to focus on gender equality when ensuring local ownership and legitimacy for the designation and development of protected areas? Can we afford to take the risk of protected areas stagnating in their development because of hidden gender conflicts between the different groups involved?

I think we cannot if we want to improve the quality of life for men and women by sustainably conceptualizing and managing Alpine protected areas. I think it is important to strengthen the social and cultural pillars of sustainability with regard to gender if we do not want to risk prolonging gender inequality in local participation and decision-making on protected areas and a deficiency in modern democracy.

Shortall (2006: 219) criticizes the lack of attention to gendered barriers to participation. As long as women have to adopt a male pattern of behavior to participate and are seen as women rather than as equal players in the rural structures of governance, the gendered nature of rural development policy will not change, and patriarchal gender relations will be sustained. This is confirmed by other European studies (Asztalos Morell and Bock 2008; Mölders 2012) and can also be expected for the male-dominated boards of Alpine protected areas.

Gender-specific discourses on rural development and local resource management also help ensure that topics that women see as important for their quality of life are taken seriously: “There are female voices in particular demanding more resources for rural development, for public services, and for culture (arts and heritage activities). The activists in cultural groups feel that the significance of culture for a good quality of life is not recognized by the decision-makers, and neither is its long-term significance for the development of tourism and general attractiveness of the area” (Lehto and Oksa 2009: 42).

In protected areas, as elsewhere, gender as an analytical category can help to identify manmade barriers

that prevent sustainable regional development. As long as assumptions are made about the community that do not consider internal social differentiation, unequal power relations within the group and differential participation in development processes continue to be ignored. Gender training and gender impact assessment are needed to sensitize everybody to the gender-specific dimensions of Alpine protected areas.

It is true for most European regions that more and more women are earning good qualifications. Various studies have demonstrated, as confirmed by the female managers of protected areas interviewed for this study and as Little has shown in *Gender and Rural Geography*, that “women are increasingly willing to participate in environmental debates and to use their skills and knowledge to speak out on environmental issues” (Little 2002: 68). This supports Moser’s (2009) assessment that strengthening women will also contribute to reconciling human, natural, and economic spheres in the Großes Walsertal Biosphere Reserve—and, I am convinced, in other Alpine protected areas as well.

## Recommendations

A discussion is needed about fundamental changes in our relationship to nature on the one hand, and about social norms and contracts on the other, to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of development and added value. What constitutes quality of life in protected areas, and how this is related to gender issues, needs to be discussed at various levels.

- Protected areas and regional policy should not be understood as just conservation and regional economic policy but also as an opportunity for realizing social justice in everyday life.
- Awareness of gender disparities at regional level needs to be raised, especially with representatives of municipalities and associations.
- The proportion of women in important political bodies should be increased, if necessary by introducing binding quotas.
- Gender knowledge should be integrated in educational activities, especially in the training of rangers and managers of protected areas.

Women, as well as men with gender equity awareness, no longer accept that women living in mountain areas are stamped as “silent contributors to the global agenda for sustainable mountain development” (Rudaz and Debarbieux 2012). They want to be active partners within the framework of the global mountain agenda “in order to integrate a gendered dimension into the general rescaling process required by the recent globalization of mountain issues” (Rudaz and Debarbieux 2012: 14). At the same time, male-dominated research and stakeholder groups are being challenged to integrate women, who have in the

past missed out on opportunities to participate, and to support them in raising their voices. Only in a joint effort can governance in mountain regions be developed in a

way that incorporates gender justice and “innovations towards gender transformative change” (Verma 2014, in this issue).

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