



## Women, children and well-being in the mountains of the Hindu Kush Himalayan region

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*Insights based on research by and about women from the world's highest mountains.*

### [Household gardening in Nepal](#)

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Mountain people rank among the most deprived sectors of the world's population, and yet it is well recognized that their stewardship of mountain natural resources is closely linked to the sustainability of life in lowland areas. What has received less attention, however, is the dominant role that women in these mountain areas play in natural resource management, agricultural production and the well-being and very survival of mountain families, including children. In mountain regions, as in the rest of the world, women, as a class, are more undernourished, more undercompensated for their labour and more underrepresented in formal decision-making bodies than men. The only measure in which women collectively come out "ahead" is life span; those who endure seem to be hardy (although in Nepal women's lives are shorter than men's).

There are very few data on the situation of mountain women, or of gender relations in the Hindu Kush Himalayan (HKH) region. Much of the information available in the countries concerned has not been disaggregated by agro-ecological regions to give information on mountain people, much less by gender. Scanty information can be gleaned from anthropological ethnographies, but studies on the status of women in the region, for the most part, focus on lowland women and urban environments. What is clearly missing is a description of their situation told by mountain women themselves.

To address this data gap, during 1996 and 1997, 16 female researchers from eight countries in the HKH region (Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, India, Myanmar, Nepal and Pakistan) were involved in the collection of information on the status of women in mountain areas. This research was undertaken to provide a focus on the lives of mountain women, to provide accurate data for national-level databases, and to examine policies specifically aimed at women's development and the field-level realities that determine the effectiveness of those policies.

In the capital cities of eight countries and in 13 mountain villages, researchers reviewed the national and state/district/provincial policies and programmes relevant to mountain women. They then conducted community-based gender analyses to gain detailed information from rural women themselves on their constraints, needs and priorities for development. The

country reports, now being published as an ICIMOD document, provide a picture of the lives of mountain women in selected localities from Afghanistan to Myanmar.

## **THE SITUATION OF MOUNTAIN WOMEN**

### **Diversity of gender relations**

As a result of the relative inaccessibility of remote and rugged terrain, isolation has been a feature of mountain societies. Historically, isolation has served to protect the ecological and cultural integrity of the biophysical and social systems, allowing mountain societies a higher level of autonomy from the growth of political and religious institutions in the lowlands. In general, most mountain societies were characterized by having less rigid social structures and hierarchies than societies of the lowlands, where dominant religious ideologies were more influential in determining social norms and mores. Because of indigenous beliefs and the dominant role of women in livelihood systems, mountain women, in general, were traditionally afforded more freedom of movement, independent decision-making and higher status than women of the lowlands.

Nevertheless, for a long time, trading and migration have exposed mountain people to foreign cultures. Consequently, through historical processes of negotiation and transaction, mountain cultures have evolved reflecting a myriad of external influences, including those of Tibetan Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Confucianism and Christianity, which have been grafted on to indigenous ones. Over the past century, as mountain societies have become less isolated and more subject to the relationships of power, involving both state or religious authorities, indigenous constructions of gender have been transformed (Ortner, 1996).

### **Common features**

There are certain features that are common throughout the HKH region. Mountain people have historically been marginalized politically, socially and economically by the dominant lowland powers. As a result they have had little involvement with, or control over, national-level decisions. In general, mountain societies across the region exhibit similar patterns of land use, resource management and social organization. Owing to the low levels of infrastructure, mountain farmers are usually without many of the agricultural services and inputs available to lowland farmers and must, therefore, rely on natural seasonal patterns and their own knowledge and skills for survival. The significant, or even dominant, role of women in the sphere of production, as well as in the more conventional domestic sphere, is a common feature. Other commonalities include patriarchy, impacts of environmental degradation, imposition of new values and poor representation of women's interest at all political levels.

### **Patriarchy**

Patriarchy, or the domination of society by males, is prevalent throughout the region. It is more pronounced in Muslim, Hindu and Confucian societies, but also exists in Buddhist and Christian ones. In Humla, a remote district in Nepal, the researcher was surprised to learn that the same Sanskrit-based proverbs that describe women's lower status were also found in the Tibetan language used by the Buddhist community that had cohabited for many generations with the Hindu community (Thapa, 1996). In parts of Bhutan, Tibet and northeastern India, matriarchal communities still exist, although they are increasingly coming under the influence of powerful, external forces from lowland societies, including Hinduism and Christianity (Kikhi, 1997; B. Gurung, 1998).

Owing to the extreme diversity of cultures, the degree of patriarchy varies but the word can be used to describe most of the gender relations in the HKH region, even in Buddhist and animist societies where women have traditionally enjoyed a more egalitarian relationship with men.

## **Low self-image and self-esteem**

One aspect of a patriarchal society is the low status it affords to women. From the time of birth, females are repeatedly reminded, in subtle and not-so-subtle ways, of their inferiority. A female is considered to be a lower form of rebirth and a kind of negative force that can bewitch and bring harm to others (Ortner, 1996). In all of the case studies, with the exception of tribal groups of the Chittagong hill tracts, women reported lower levels of self-esteem than men and a lower image in their society. Again, this was not expected of Buddhist and animist communities, but the predominating ideologies of societies outside these communities seem to be creeping in and having a profound effect on the messages women receive on the "proper" place for females in the society. In fact, the notion of males having achieved a higher status at birth than females is also commonly expressed throughout relatively "pure" Buddhist societies such as those found in Bhutan (Roder, 1997).

## **Patrilocal residence**

The patriarchal system is shaped by patrilocal residence and kinship relationships that force females to leave their natal homes on marriage and live in unfamiliar surroundings under the control of their husbands' families. Most marriages are still arranged by parents, so a woman must establish herself among relative strangers, with little of the family support that she enjoyed at home. The difficulties and hardships inflicted by a mother-in-law on the new bride are well known in the countries of Nepal and India (NPC of Nepal and UNICEF, 1996; ESCAP, 1997).

## **Inequitable inheritance rights**

Customary laws throughout much of the mountain region dictate that sons inherit the land and herds of their parents, while women inherit only movable goods, such as jewellery and household items. Thus, men are the owners of production, while women are without property, which leaves them vulnerable and dependent on the goodwill and sense of responsibility of their menfolk. In addition to the obvious inequity inherent in this arrangement, it also hampers women's abilities to expand their livelihood options by denying them credit from financial institutions, as they do not possess the collateral required for loans (Ortner, 1996).

## **ENVIRONMENTAL MANAGEMENT**

### **Indigenous knowledge**

In the risk-prone environment of the mountains, full of uncertainty and diverse agro-ecological conditions, farmers must maintain a careful selection of crops, plants and livestock varieties that are well adapted to their harsh environments, demand few resources and provide security against risks. Livelihood strategies depend largely on the wise management and use of diverse genetic resources.

As the dominant farmers and household managers, women are involved in every stage of crop cultivation, from seed planting to consumption, and have therefore acquired the most complete understanding of the uses and usefulness of specific plants. They are also experts in the selection, cultivation and processing of other plants and animals and for generations have been the managers of crop germplasm and its diversity, through the testing, preservation and exchange of seed via informal networks (FAO, forthcoming). Their special knowledge of the value and diverse uses of plants for nutrition, food security, health and income provides a balance to the market-oriented pressures that emphasize high yield and uniformity (Eyzaguirre and Raymond, 1995).

### **Decreased access to forest and water resources**

The reduction of forest and water resources caused by environmental degradation has an impact on the women responsible for the collection and management of these resources, often forcing them to travel longer distances to meet the daily needs of their households. In most instances, in the short term, social and community forestry projects have also had a negative impact on women's lives, as they have limited their access as collectors in nearby forests, thus forcing them to search for fodder and fuelwood in more distant forests and grasslands. The privatization of common lands has also restricted collection of once freely available grasses and other subsistence needs, and has placed women in conflict with male strangers who protect the forest resources that women need for survival (Mehta, 1995). To date, there are very few places where alternative technologies provide non-traditional sources of cooking fuel or new methods of transporting water.

### **Heavy workloads**

The burdens of rural women in the HKH region are well documented and known to most development workers in the region and throughout the world, but it should, nonetheless, be restated here that mountain women bear substantially more of the domestic and farm responsibilities than their menfolk or than their counterparts in the plains. The back-breaking chores of carrying water, fodder and fuelwood up and down steep mountain slopes are undertaken daily, consuming large portions of the women's time and energy. In some parts of the Uttar Pradesh hills, the work of women seems to have reached an inhuman level and observers ponder on how long women existing on a limited caloric intake, and often in a pregnant or lactating state, can physically continue to bear this load.

With no relief from excessive workloads in sight, women have no choice but to pull their children out of school to help with the chores. This, in effect, denies the family the benefits of having educated members and denies children the right to education. Female children are usually the first to be kept back from school, as they are given the responsibility of caring for younger siblings and helping with domestic work.

### **Absent men**

Male outmigration for short or long periods is increasing throughout the region as people struggle to find ways to sustain their families and farmlands amid decreasing crop yields and during periods of scarcity. Although older men may remain in the home, younger and more able men are often absent for months or even years on end, leaving more and more of the labour burdens on the shoulders of women. It is questionable whether this provides women with a greater role in decision-making, as the presence of older men in the household negates such an opportunity. In many circumstances, major decisions are delayed until the "household head" returns for his annual visit home. The absence of males does allow women more opportunities to participate in public life, such as when they are able to represent their households in forest user group meetings in the hills of Nepal, but there is no evidence to indicate that this experience translates into a reconfiguration of gender relations.

In some cases, such as in Afghanistan, significant numbers of men have been maimed, crippled or left mentally incapacitated by war or armed conflicts, leaving women to manage entirely the household affairs during times of severe hardship. In light of this fact, the Taliban government's recently enacted curtailment of women's movement outside the home has made family survival extremely difficult (Zewari, 1996).

### **[Women are responsible for collection and management of water resources](#)**

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### **Malnutrition**

Declining household food security levels, inadequate agricultural practices and soil fertility losses all lead to malnutrition. In the ecologically fragile mountain areas, environmental degradation directly affects the quantity and quality of food resources. As a result of socio-cultural norms, women and children are most vulnerable to scarcities, as they receive inadequate quantities and poor-quality nourishment, perform excessive labour and have limited access to health services. In Nepal, as many as 80 percent of women of childbearing age are anaemic, and studies have shown a widespread lack of sufficient protein, vitamin A, iron and iodine (NPC of Nepal and UNICEF, 1996). In addition, inadequate supplies of clean drinking-water and unsafe sanitation practices in the home result in high exposure to disease.

## **CHANGING VALUES**

### **Monetization**

In most mountain communities, traditional forms of bartering have given way to monetary exchange. Much of a person's economic value to a household is increasingly defined by the amount of cash that he or she can bring in. As women are still involved primarily in subsistence farming activities on the family land, they do not earn cash for their hard work. And, as roads open up markets for the selling of farm products, women are usually left out of the cash transactions as men take control. Previously, women had much more authority over farm products, which they would barter for household necessities. But, owing to their limited mobility, lack of ease in dealing with male traders and low self-esteem, women today are usually excluded from cash transactions. There are some communities in the high mountain areas, however, where women have long been involved in trade, even with countries in Southeast Asia. Women of the Manang and Sherpa communities of Nepal are well known for their entrepreneurial abilities in trading and tourism enterprises.

### **Influx of new values**

As already mentioned, even the relatively egalitarian examples of gender relations in some traditional mountain societies with Buddhist or animist beliefs are being transformed by the prevailing values belonging to lowland religious, nationalistic and cultural paradigms. Some of these new values come from Western influences, some from regional pan-South Asian influences and some from development paradigms themselves. The marginal status of most mountain societies makes resistance to more powerful forces difficult, and the process of mainstreaming mountain cultures into national identities may negate the stronger positions of women from these traditional communities. Changes occurring in once remote mountain areas are affecting gender relations in ways that are not yet fully understood, but the indications are that a woman's value in her household, community and society is declining as money and outside worldliness are becoming the new indicators of status (B. Gurung, 1998).

However, the influx of new values does not always have negative consequences for women. Significant numbers are now working to earn a living and support their families, and some have professional positions. New values bring new aspirations; for example, parents in Bhutan are now sending their daughters to school as they believe education can free them from being trapped at home. Furthermore, mountain communities are increasingly making demands for infrastructural developments that can bring them markets and higher profit margins for their products (Tshering, 1998).

## **INVISIBILITY OF WOMEN**

Although the data clearly show that women are the dominant farmers in mountain areas, their significant knowledge, management and even labour in the forests and fields are ignored by the predominantly male-oriented research and extension staff. There are very few female professional foresters and agriculturists to challenge the existing stereotypes (8 percent in

Nepal), and these pioneering women face immense barriers in their efforts to bring extension services to female farmers (Nepali, 1998).

Because the contribution of women to agricultural production is not visible and not usually considered significant by agricultural professionals, their roles as managers of agrobiodiversity in the region have gone largely unnoticed. As professional officers often believe traditional crop varieties to be inferior, "backward" crops, the female keepers of the knowledge of these "marginal" species are themselves socially marginalized. Women's traditional knowledge is being devalued and their status is fast eroding in societies that value only those who can produce cash and demonstrate characteristics that ascribe to them the qualities of belonging to the "modern" world.

Statistics indicate that the representation of women in national political bodies is extremely low in most countries of the HKH region, even in countries such as Bhutan where the status of women in the household is more equal to that of men. There are very few women from mountain areas who can represent the interests of similar women in political bodies.

There are many programmes to address the practical and strategic needs of rural women. There is, however, disturbingly little evidence that these programmes and policies have had any impact on or, in many cases, were even known to women. Policies that have been designed, with the best intentions, in capital cities had not taken the local realities of women's lives into account. The heavy workload and limited mobility of women often made it impossible for them to take advantage of goods and services related to health, for instance, which are supposedly provided by governmental and non-governmental organization (NGO) agencies. Furthermore, frequently there were few or no financial allocations tied to the policy directives, so that they became little more than expressions of intent noted on official documents.

## **LINKS BETWEEN THE STATUS OF WOMEN AND CHILDREN**

In remote areas where health facilities are scarce, women are exposed to high risks associated with child bearing. Working 14 to 16 hours a day with inadequate protein, iron and calorie intake, women do not obtain the expected weight gain during pregnancy, leading to improper development of the foetus and low birth weights.

Mountain areas in the HKH region have some of the highest infant and maternal mortality rates in the world. This is a direct result of poor maternal health and inadequate safe motherhood practices -partially owing to the lack of time for women to give proper care to themselves or their children, partially to a shortage of necessary resources, especially water, and partially to the complete absence of health education and services in remote areas. A recent letter published in the *Kathmandu Post* (1998) stated that, of 14 medical centres in Nepal able to handle complicated deliveries only two were located in mountain regions, and these are accessible to only a tiny percentage of the women needing such assistance in the mountains. In most homes, even the services of a trained birth attendant are not available.

### **[A woman and her child In Bhutan](#)**

H. RANA

The high prevalence of malnutrition contributes to the high rates of disease and death of children, as well as to their delayed physical and mental growth and development. Female children in some cultures receive less food and medical attention than their brothers, owing to gender discrimination. In patriarchal societies, the necessity of having sons in the family dictates that women must bear continual pregnancies until that objective is met.

When women are given the opportunity to determine the number and spacing of their children, they can better assure their survival and care. When women are educated, they are better

able to guarantee their children's education and healthy upbringing. When they are relieved of their excessive work burdens, they have more time to devote to the proper nurturing of their children. A mother who is self-confident and has the same rights and resources as a man can enrich the family, and particularly the children, by recognizing and promoting the best interests of children in every sphere - survival, development, protection and participation (NPC of Nepal and UNICEF, 1996).

## **HOPES FOR THE FUTURE**

### **Educational opportunities**

One of the most dramatic changes seen at the rural level is the education of female children. Perhaps as a result of the campaigns of a few international agencies, girls are now increasingly being enrolled in school. This does not necessarily translate into attendance, owing to their responsibilities for child care, livestock herding and such, but their enrolment indicates a new investment in girls' lives.

The other development in education that is being seen in the mountains is non-formal education for women. Immensely popular, these programmes provide women with basic reading, writing and accounting skills and also expose them to new technologies and information about health and other concerns. The greatest impact, however, may be in women's newly found levels of self-confidence and commitment to change things for the better in collaboration with other women in the community.

### **Political participation**

Although very few mountain women hold political appointments in national assemblies, increasingly women are voting and taking up positions in local bodies, such as the village panchayats in India. In some countries, this is encouraged through the provision of seats reserved for women. In others, women are becoming more confident about speaking at public meetings and becoming active members, and even leaders, of user groups for water and forest management. As governing bodies in countries of the HKH region are becoming increasingly democratic and decentralized, more women with leadership abilities will take up positions where they are able to represent the needs and interests of mountain women who are otherwise without a voice in national bodies.

### **[A young child with fuelwood in Bhutan](#)**

H. RANA

### **Taking the lead**

In some mountain communities, women have banded together to address the problems of environmental deterioration, economic hardship and domestic violence. In addition to the well-known example of the Chipko movement in the hills of Uttar Pradesh, another form of social organization which is indigenous to the Gurung society, the mothers' group, has recently received attention. Taking community development into their own hands in the hills of Nepal, these groups have mobilized support from projects and tourists to build footpaths, establish fodder/fuelwood plantations, start day care centres, set up savings schemes and build biogas plants. Across the hills of Nepal and India, such groups are using their joint power to wage war on alcoholism and domestic violence.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

The situation of women in the mountain areas of the HKH region presents a contradictory picture. Women throughout highland societies appear to be competent, knowledgeable,

independent actors on whose shoulders the bulk of the responsibility for survival and sustainability of mountain households and communities rests. However, they are weighed down by structural constraints based on gender, burdened by negative ideologies, have no economic assets and are often unable to enforce their decisions even over their own labour, bodies and major life events.

It is also clear that the stereotypic images that the world has about the women of the South Asian subcontinent do not reflect the reality found in many mountain households and communities of the HKH region. Outsiders who work with mountain women often assume that they are subject to the same levels of gender inequity as lowland women, and thus impose their own biases on how they are to behave. This attitude, together with a myriad of other external forces, is causing mountain women to lose status and value in their own communities.

Development strategies throughout the region do not yet seem to understand that gender bias is a primary cause of poverty because it prevents women from obtaining the education, training, health services, legal status and other capabilities and opportunities to combat it. Only when gender discrimination is reduced and eventually eliminated can the economic and environmental problems of the Hindu Kush Himalayan region be solved.

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