

## **Official paper for Celebrating Mountain Women Conference**

Prime Minister's Office, Italy

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The important gathering of Mountain Women in Thimphu marks the beginning of the closing of the International Year of Mountains 2002.

In fact, in less than one month, another Capital - Bishkek, in Kyrgyzstan - one of the most mountainous countries in the world will host the great international meeting for the closing of this year of celebrations.

During 2002, mountain-related issues have been the focus of attention of the political, social and economic lives of many countries around the world. In those areas, mountain regions have significant importance as a crucial resource for sustainable development, as an irreplaceable element for the preservation of the world ecosystem, and as a basic reserve of water and environmental resources.

Many theories have been developed on the aforementioned themes, and their most significant and outstanding outcomes have been expressed at the high summits, which held simultaneously on four continents last May.

Just to highlight the mountains strategic importance for the economy and the environment, mountains were one of the main topics of discussion during the international assemblies held in Rome, the FAO Summit and, more recently, at the Summit on Environment held in Johannesburg, ten years after the Rio de Janeiro Earth Summit.

Both in Rome and Johannesburg, the issue of women was tackled in the official documents. They stress the crucial importance of women for the democratic, economic and political growth of all countries, thus confirming the relevance mountain women have been attributed in the papers produced during the satellite meetings on mountains.

The work mountain women carried out this year during their local, regional and international meetings, in women associations, NGOs, and various institutions finds here, in Thimphu, a common synthesis of needs and prospects.

With this view, the women representing the Italian Government intend to present this document as a contribution to a project aimed at giving greater

and more concrete visibility to the problems affecting mountain women, and at facilitating the solution of their problems. However, any initiative undertaken towards this direction, will take place within the framework of sustainable development, one of the main pillars of the vast world strategies, which should not be postponed any longer.

There is a peculiar affinity linking women and mountains: mountains are a source of life for mankind; women are the givers and guardians of life, and without such life mountains themselves are destined to perish.

Any project aimed at developing and breathing life into mountains should envisage the proactive and practical participation of mountain women.

Despite the various successful initiatives carried out by Italy, which allowed mountain areas not to be isolated from the Country's active and productive life, a lot needs to be done to enable mountain women to reach their economic self-sufficiency and productive capacity, offering them cultural support and equal opportunities with respect to the women living in the plains.

In this complex context, Italy deems it essential to prioritize the demands for action considered as the basic ones by the Beijing World Conference on Women. Hence, mountain women, like all women, must be empowered and more visible in their active participation in social life. Their presence in governmental bodies should increase, and they should take more active part in state management. Moreover, and most importantly, the policies for the local development of these mountain areas will have to be analyzed and planned in a gender perspective. They should meet the needs of all women and men, by taking into due account the demands of women, who represent a substantial part of society, if not the quantitatively most relevant component. This notion of "mainstreaming" shall allow a different approach to the analysis and solution of the problems relating to the development and socio-economic growth of mountain areas. In fact, it involves the portion of society which suffers the most from the difficulties and delays of structural interventions to be carried out in mountainous regions, from mobility to services, from schooling to the "digital divide" etc.

Nation States and all governmental levels should pass electoral laws and design the tools necessary to overcome the obstacles which still make women's participation and decision making power difficult to achieve. In other words, electoral laws should entail equal access for men and women, and envisage measures to combine private life and work, awareness campaigns to promote the sharing of childcare activities and family responsibilities.

**Women and mountains: an inseparable couple**

When women leave, mountains die, failing to safeguard the balanced relation between development and protection of the territory, of its environmental, historical, architectural, and natural values and landscape.

Actually, several studies and documents depict women as the subjects who are able to protect the natural heritage of the mountain communities in which they live, and identify them with all the actions founded on identity values and continuing education, considered essential for a sustainable development offering a tomorrow to future generations.

This is why a harmonious development should be pursued, meeting all social, economic and cultural needs, in order to render equal dignity and opportunities to mountain communities and those living in the rest of the Country.

Although, to date, in Italy no scientific studies have been carried out concerning the importance and value of mountain economies (in fact, the first scientific study on mountain GDP, promoted by Uncem<sup>1</sup> in cooperation with INRM<sup>2</sup> and Censis<sup>3</sup>, shall only be published next October), from the existing data it can be inferred that women are one of the most innovative elements with respect to micro-economy and "identity-economy" initiatives. It has been shown that the latter are able to support a different development, one which is in harmony with the territory, and very careful not to deprive it of its resources, but aiming at exploiting them intelligently and respectfully.

<sup>1</sup>Unione Nazionale Comuni Comunità Enti Montani (National Association of Mountain Municipalities and Authorities).

<sup>2</sup>Istituto Nazionale per la Ricerca Scientifica e Tecnologica (National Institute for Scientific and Technological Research).

<sup>3</sup>Centro Studi e Investimenti Sociali (Center for Social Studies and Policies).

However, today, this system is no longer able to provide the resources required to meet the needs of modern life. Therefore, on the one hand, women state their need of remaining close to their territories and, on the other hand, the necessity of not being excluded from globalization processes. In short, women are the most significant witnesses of the *glocal* thought (act locally, think globally).

Technological innovations and the access to the information society become, therefore, essential tools to transcend the limitations of a type of development which had to come to terms with mountains' orographic configuration, the access-related difficulties, the remoteness of big urban centers, the sparse built-up areas, and the objective difficulties in experiencing organized aggregation.

If this is true for all mountain inhabitants, then a fortiori it is true for women. The impact of the information society on the fields of training, work,

entertainment and even health should now be considered as a fact, as well as its increasing magnitude and importance.

Actually, its extensiveness and relevance prompted a series of specific studies, aiming at verifying if there exist gender differences in the access to, in the study and use of information technologies.

The results, which have been recently published, depicted the shape and magnitude of the aforesaid phenomenon that is a gender gap, which is often absurdly removed by women themselves.

In many countries, the measures taken in order to facilitate women access to the labor market are proving to be successful, and this is confirmed by the fact that their presence is both quantitatively and qualitatively increasing.

However, new technologies, which have massively pervaded the production and communication worlds, threaten to become a discrimination factor if women are not guaranteed equal access to the new IT instruments.

Hence, guaranteeing equal opportunities in the fields of education and training represents a major and ineludible challenge, in order to avoid women social and professional regression.

Hence, all countries should implement a series of programs, based on the acknowledgement of the need for the promotion and development of equal opportunities of access to the information society, thus entailing a change in the IT educational, training and production systems. Women should play a proactive role in said initiatives, being aware of all the risks resulting from social exclusion, and of the possibility of improving their private and working lives through the use of new technologies.

For instance, it is more difficult for women to move about in the mountains than for those living in the plains. In fact, in the mountains, there are less public transport facilities, a greater need to own private cars and a driver's license, longer traveling times, higher costs etc.

Viable telematic infrastructures and the use of information tools and technologies could help overcoming many of the aforementioned difficulties.

In fact, today, very many services can be accessed through the Internet: bank, administrative, commercial, health, school, entertainment, training and cultural services are available on line.

Women would save a lot of time in performing their traditional functions, and the time they save could be reinvested in their work, in their cultural improvement, childcare, social or entertainment activities.

The microentrepreneurial activities of women often result in high quality products, targeting specific market niches, and which are not easily identifiable with traditional instruments. However, e-commerce could offer new and remarkably interesting opportunities, especially to the above-mentioned types of products.

Moreover, new working opportunities would also be opened for those highly skilled women who, today, are excluded from the labor market because they live in remote areas. Actually, thanks to telecommuting (computerized home work), they could work even while their children are infants or when their families need their presence.

Moreover, in those countries whose dominant culture does not relish having men and women working in the same place, the new technologies would allow women to do various and gratifying works meanwhile respecting their cultural traditions.

Another field in which women place a lot of value is the one of social and health services, and telemedicine can provide important and significant answers with this respect.

Knowing that, in the event of an emergency or any time they need it, their family doctors or the small local hospitals can contact the best specialists and hospitals in the world, in order to have consultations, make diagnoses, and ask for advice, would make women and their families feel safer than they do today.

One of the fields in which the presence of women is still weak (and mountain women are no exception) is the world of national and local politics and government (at municipal, provincial and regional level); maybe, even in these sectors, mastering the new technologies could help women to participate in larger numbers.

What keeps women away from politics? It is often the time they devote to their families and, hence, the difficulty in bridging the time needed to look after their families and to do their work, and the time for the management of the state.

Once again, telematics could help women meet the many daily needs they have to satisfy, and "stealing" time from their families and work could represent an important stimulus.

This year, the Italian Government strongly promoted the computerization of local communities through the "e-government" Project, also envisaging international cooperation with some developing countries.

Therefore, we hope that Governments are able and willing to launch projects promoting the study and use of the new information technologies, so as to guarantee equal access to the information society.

It is up to us, as women, in all of our movements, our national and international organizations, to ask for and support such projects. They should aim at improving the lives of mountain women and, through the sustainable development of life in the mountains, meet the demands that we, as women, have been bringing to the world's attention for over one century. In fact, what we have been asking for is equal dignity between men and women, and equal dignity between nations.

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### **Notes to readers**

This is an official paper from the Prime Minister's Office, Equal Opportunities Department, Regional Affairs Department, Equality Commission, National Association of Mountain Municipalities, Italy, for the Celebrating Mountain Women Conference held in 2002.