

New Vulnerabilities for Mountain Women: A Different Light on the Greater Himalaya

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Abstract

“When the repression is strong, the men retreat because they are too vulnerable. Instead, the women come out in their traditional roles, as nurturers and as protectors of the community.” (ICIMOD, 2001, Manchanda, Voices of Mountain Women,).

Women in the Himalayan Region are disadvantaged in manifold ways. In addition to the challenges of living in the mountains, like harsh climate and inadequate infrastructure they experience unequal treatment based in traditional gender relationships that deprives them from equal access to health, education, property and wellbeing.

The vulnerability of women is increasing in situations of rapid change or stress like political conflicts and natural disasters. This paper argues that the widespread and increasingly popular labour migration of men from the Himalaya must be considered as a factor that may contribute to increased vulnerability of the women left behind.

It is difficult to generalize across the countries but men’s migration has in one way contributed to the economic stability and indirectly improved women’s leadership and decision-making power. On the other hand, with added roles and responsibilities, women’s workload has increased by leaving them to shoulder the burden of mountain economy. In general, women’s access to education, communication and health facilities still remains at a very low level, thus reinforcing feminization of poverty. In conclusion this paper makes an argument of increased importance of engendering all mountain development activities.

I. Introduction

How can one speak about war, poverty and inequality when people who suffer from these afflictions do not have a voice to speak?” These words spoken by Isabel Allende describe the status of women from developing countries, especially those from the mountains. Coming from a mountain region of the Everest in Nepal, I have heard the songs of woes of women in dealing with the harsh situations in the mountains. The trend of out migration from the mountain communities to the cities of the low land areas has had serious impacts on the lives of those remaining behind. There is an urgent need to discuss the issues of migration, its causes and strategies, especially for the women, who shoulder the mountain development.

Mountain Development: A Global Issue

Mountain development has gained considerable attention globally in the development sphere after the needs of the mountain communities were recognized in the Agenda 21, chapter 13 (Fragile Mountain Environments). Mountain communities, undoubtedly, are rich in terms of bio-cultural diversity; yet remain deprived, compared to the surrounding lowlands.

The mountain people face harsh environmental and climatic conditions as well as difficult geographical terrains. This undeniably points to the infrastructure constraints existing in the mountain terrains. The people of the Hindu Kush Himalayan region¹ are vulnerable and consistently face hardships due to lack of access to market, education, exposure, information and communication. Smooth implementation of development activities is impeded owing to the topography and the state's negligence. Lack of representation in state politics prolongs mountain communities' voice to remain inaudible.

Globalization leaves both positive and negative impacts on mountain livelihoods. Countries like India, Bangladesh, China and Nepal are fast embracing tourism trends and opening new vistas for mountain economy. China and India are one of the fastest growing economies in the region, yet, have one of the highest poverty ratios. Therefore, careful planning for sustainable development is crucial, otherwise, there is a possibility of endangering the mountain livelihoods. The increasing attention to climate change today thus reinforces the importance of globalizing the mountain agenda.

¹ HKH region encompasses the water castle for six large river systems, provides almost 1/3 of the water resources to the people in the region, whose livelihoods are dependent on the Greater Himalayas. It is the habitat of around 150 million people belonging generally to poor and marginal groups living in an increasingly fragile environment of 8 countries: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, India, Myanmar, Nepal and Pakistan. Since 1983, ICIMOD has worked in the HKH region.

II. Engendering the Mountain Development

Women and mountains share an intricate relationship therefore pressure on the mountain resources can threaten their livelihood. Since women are usually the ultimate users of the natural resources, their contribution in promoting sustainable use is utmost important. In the case of the Nepal's Himalayas, women attach religious significance to preserving mountain environments, as mountains are worshipped as gods.

Women, as natural resource managers, possess undocumented indigenous knowledge, which is seldom acknowledged but often exploited. Their contribution in preserving the indigenous cultures is also important in the study of mountains cultures. ‘We don’t need to be taught about fodder and fuel wood. We learn that from the time we learn to walk and carry a small load.’ (ICIMOD, 2002; Voices of Mountain Women)

The depleting forest and its natural resources and introduction of cash crops have affected women adversely by increasing their workload in the mountains. Despite women’s major role in agriculture, livestock, household and domestic work, with men’s role limited to decision making and marketing, men ironically control land, assets, and access to information, knowledge and community development.

The women of the Hindu Kush Himalaya of Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, India, Myanmar, Nepal and Pakistan share similar status. However, it would be wrong to say that the status of women across the countries is on the same level, due to cultural and legal variations. Nevertheless, one can see a commonality binding these women, which brings them together to talk about issues of marginalization and vulnerabilities.

III. The last to benefit and the first to suffer

History shows that women are the last to benefit from economic boom and the first to suffer from regression. Despite their contribution, mountain women remain as the marginalized gender of the marginalized mountain areas, and thus face double marginalization. Their representation is low in decision-making, albeit high in implementation of development activities. With the vast challenges of mountain women, vis-à-vis low land women, lack of required education and exposure make them less confident and thus the vulnerable gender.

Since the entire mountain region suffers from issues of ethnic recognition, environmental degradation and poverty; gender development often gets diluted and limited only to political speeches and documents.

Women's Triple Role

Often, in development terminologies, greater participation is associated proportionately with improved conditions. While lobbying for women as actors of change, there is a tendency of development organizations to add extra workload on already overloaded mountain women. Questions of women's free time for leisure are equally important. Mountain women in Nepal sleep in average four hours in 24 hours, with no leisure time (Shrestha and Amatya, 1998). In some parts of the Uttaranchal, India, women's work seems to have reached an inhuman level, leaving observers to ponder on how long women existing on a limited caloric input and often in a pregnant or lactating state can physically continue to bear this load (Mukherjee, 1996)

The triple role of women in production, reproduction and development puts forth the argument of excessive workload and women's deteriorating health and physical ability. Lack of access to health services, medicines and health posts further aggravate the situation of mountain women. Informal interactions point to the fact that even where health posts are available, women have the tendency not to undergo medication, primarily to save money for the family, and most unfortunately, due to lack of family interest.

Although mountain women shoulder excessive workloads as the main natural resource managers, the farmers who plant and water the seeds, take care of the livestock, feed and milk the cows, and look after the households, rarely do they own the land or make the policy decisions that affect their lives.

Power Struggle

The deeply rooted traditional practices play significant role in deepening the gender divide, thus marginalizing women from their share of benefits. Patriarchy plays a significant role in increasing gender disparity, depriving them from getting equal opportunities at all levels from household to society.

Ironically, in most of the societies, women's power struggle is seen more amongst women themselves, rather than with men. A woman's power status within her household can depend on her age and relation. Bennett puts forward her argument that in indo Aryan families, wives are always considered dangerous and sisters sacred, linking to patrifocal and filia focal affiliations. (Bennett, L.) If a daughter in-law has a lower position, the mother/sister in-law might well be in a higher position.

Often, not always, women are the promoters of patriarchy, simply because they lack the awareness and confidence to voice against it. In most of the cases, women take their lower status for granted, underlining fatalism.

Links between Gender Blind and Discriminatory Policies

In state policies, a glass wall exists where the laws are blind towards the issues of gender equality. The society respects those women who remain within the societal norms and boundaries. Women thus prefer not to raise their voice against it, in fear of losing the respect and recognition they have in the society. And unfortunately the state remains *strong with the weak and weak with the strong*, flexible towards the powerful and blind towards the vulnerable.

In Nepal, the civil code is guided by Hindu manuscript called manusmriti, which preaches, “A wife and a slave can have no property and the property they acquire belongs to whom they belong”. Bhutan has a considerably high degree of gender equality in terms of rights and education, compared with other parts of South Asia, however, at policy making level, women still remain behind. The number of women in the National Assembly stands at 14 (9.33%) out of 100 representatives (as of October 2001).

In Myanmar, women are guaranteed far more rights than in other countries of the South Asia. A Burmese woman does not take the name of her father or her husband after marriage; she has the right to choose. However, according to deeply rooted Burmese cultural tradition, women are viewed as inferior because they are considered capable of polluting the hpon (‘power aura’) of men. (Sen, B.K, 2001) The constitution of Myanmar guarantees equality before the law, regardless of race, religion, status or sex. But, it does not explicitly prohibit discrimination against women. Therefore, women continue to remain marginalized from the decision-making positions, with no women in the 39-member cabinet and no women representation in the military. The government even sent an all male delegation to the 1995 UN Conference on women in Beijing (CEDAW articles).

IV. Migration

One of the major issues of Mountain development today is that of migration, particularly male migration instigated by economic conditions, armed conflicts and disasters. On one hand, labour migration improves economic conditions, in terms of remittance, on the other hand; it has unintentionally created a vacuum in the mountains today, putting extra responsibilities on the remaining few, thus resulting in gendered impacts. Nepalese Migrants working in foreign countries account to three million and bring in remittance worth 44 billion NRs (approximately USD \$630 million), thus highlighting the importance of labour migration and remittances (Kollmair, M., et al, 2006). One recent estimate places migration levels in the mountainous regions of South Asian countries for adult males in excess of 40 percent (Rasmussen and Parvez, 2002:3). This is largely fuelled by a widening divide between (insufficient) subsistence production and increasing consumption needs, on the one hand, and a strategic response to conditions of chronic under- and unemployment, on the other.

Since migration takes place mostly from rural to urban and seldom from urban to rural, it makes it all the more important for mountains to address the issue of migration.

Lack of Research

Although trends of out migration are being researched and analyzed, data is scarcely found on the impact of migration on the population that remains behind- women and children. Very little research has been carried out on the static side of the migration. Impact of male migration on women, nonetheless is a well-acknowledged fact, yet still remains almost unattended. The impact of male out migration on women can be negative, by adding extra workload and responsibilities, however positive as well, in terms of empowerment and in some cases, less frequent pregnancies (Xu J., and Rana G. ICIMOD). Several researches show that decisions to migrate are mostly influenced by economic conditions, conflict and disasters in the mountain areas. However, researches fail to show their impact of empowerment and vulnerabilities on the population that stays behind.

A. From Opportunities to Empowerment

People who migrate do not necessarily fall in the poverty strata. In fact, more often than not, only those who can afford, migrate. Feminization of poverty in the mountains, thus, creates gendered trends of migration. However, mountain women have started taking migration as a normal phenomenon, as they have learnt to adapt to it. In rural poverty affected areas, male migration is accepted, as a social prestige for the wife and the family. Due to male out migration, women of the Himalayas are running the rural mountain economy, as a result of which, women have been double empowered, with added responsibilities of community development as well as economic opportunities. Therefore, male migration has had significant contribution in women's empowerment.

Beyond the Stereotyped image

Necessity makes women take up the new role as the head of the household, in the migration phase. In this phase of survival, women begin to discover hidden strengths, skills and confidence within.

In a village in Rasuwa, eastern Nepal, a woman by the name of Phurpu Tamang is an example of someone who has experienced male out migration with her husband now working in the capital city. Phurpu is an uneducated woman with three daughters, and was relying completely on her husband. However, with the changed circumstance of her husband's migration, she started selling the caps she used to make during her free time. These caps are typical of the Tibetan culture that prevails in the mountains of Rasuwa and so served as souvenirs for tourists. She says, "I did not know that I could earn good money by selling the indigenous caps. Necessity made me realize my indigenous skills and utilize it. Today, I am able to send my daughters to school in the nearby village."

(Sherpa, D, TRPAP, 2006.)

Besides looking after the household and shouldering the economic burden (partially), women tend to nurture and safeguard the traditional cultures and the mountain environments. The evident fact of women as the prime natural resource managers often hides the ordeals they have to face in preserving the mountain environments in the harsh situations. Despite limited access to health services, women are seen carrying fuel wood, fodder, and water in the most difficult topography landscapes of the mountains. Amidst the household chores, nurturing the children and the family members, and maintaining economic stability in the family, they still amazingly make time for development activities to preserve the ecosystems with equal amount of zeal and desire. Today, in the HKH region, there are women's waste management committees, aama samuha (mothers' groups), women run community centers, savings and credit cooperatives, infrastructure development committees, indigenous handicraft making, etc., all adding impetus to mountain development.

Exposure to government offices, development organizations and to visitors necessitates women to take up different roles than what they are used to. Women realize their hidden potential and strength to cope with circumstances in the absence of their male counterparts. This automatically gives them a decision making position. Male migration unintentionally brings changes in women's confidence and empowerment.

Temporary Substitution

Kaspar in her research in Nepal (2005), states that women choose not to change the gender hierarchy permanently. Women tend to believe that migrant men bring extra money for the family, sacrificing their family life, while not taking into account their share of contribution as an economic activity.

Women make decisions on a daily basis, in the absence of men as long as they do not affect the household and societal position. They can make independent decisions about seeds, harvesting, which otherwise would not happen in a pre migration phase. However, when important decisions about schooling and marriage of a child, are concerned, they are usually postponed till the men return. Although women take up the role as the head of the household, they remain so on a temporary basis, just as a mere substitute. (Kaspar, H., 2005)

However, women's position is greatly influenced by the structure of the household. In a joint family system, there is a possibility of the woman's position becoming worse during migration phase, due to lack of direct communication with the in laws (especially men). In pre migration phase, women still have a chance of influencing decisions, by communicating with husbands. However, in a nuclear family, woman's position usually improves during migration phase, with more decision making roles.

The relatively small gains women obtain during displacement or migration do not necessarily translate to more equitable gender relationships. Advancement of 'women's

interests at a superficial, women-focused level that fails to challenge overall paradigms of gender differences leaves women with new roles to fulfill but no institutional leverage to fulfill them effectively' (El-Bushra 2000b).

B. Coping with Armed Conflict

Gender inequalities are exacerbated during periods of armed conflict and continue during post-conflict reconstruction. Both women and men suffer war abuses and traumas, disruptions and loss of resources. The impact of these losses is experienced in different ways and women are often disproportionately affected.

The armed conflicts in the Himalayan region are one of the prime reasons of migration, with more men migrating. Most of the countries of the HKH region like Afghanistan and Nepal, today face severe conflict. Armed conflict poses serious threat consistently to women's right and freedom, although, ironically, women's issues are at the core of the conflict, adding extra mileage, they are used just as shields and fuel for conflicts. The impacts of armed conflict on gender relations are significant. Forced displacement and gender-based violence are two examples of impacts that are not always the predictable outcomes of armed conflict, but rather are deliberate strategies of war that destabilize families and communities.

Conflict usually tears apart vulnerable areas like mountains, destroying the infrastructure, social harmony and peace. It has forced men to migrate from the mountain areas to low lands, urban cities and to foreign countries, due to fear, threats and economic opportunities. Women remain behind in the mountain areas, coping with the changed circumstances in the absence of men. In such conditions, state of anarchy, lawlessness, and violence make women the worst victims of conflict.

In Nepal, the 11-year long conflict had forced men to out migrate from the mountains since they were being either forced to join the rebel army or suspected to be Maoists. In many cases, women also migrated following the men, not always on their own decision or freedom. But those women who were left behind faced harassment from the government forces as well as the rebellion forces.

In war torn Afghanistan, a significant number of men are crippled or maimed and today, women have taken the responsibility of managing the household in times of severe hardship, despite the traditional restrictions on mobility, imposed on them (Zewari, N., 1996). In some cases, women have constituted the majority of civilians injured or killed as a result of the mis-targeted bombing of houses, hospitals and other civilian structures (Malakunas 2001). Some of the causes of these patterns are similar across the region, but not identical.

Armed conflict has thus had a hidden, dramatic and disproportionate impact on women and girls. Their role as caregivers, combined with higher levels of

poverty, means that the impact of war's destruction weighs particularly heavily on women (Amnesty International).

C. Disasters and female-headed households

Mountains are not easy places to live in, with floods as the principal hazards in the lower valleys and plains and landslides on the slopes. Millions have been displaced from their original homes. It could take generations for resettled people to adapt to an alien environment, meaning that mountain people are marginalized even further, prolonging poverty (Xu, J., and Rana, G., ICIMOD).

Disasters and natural calamities contribute to migration of families from rural areas to urban. The agonies of destruction stay for a long period and thus take time to rebuild. The vulnerabilities of the post-disaster phase can lead to creating "second generation disasters" of inequity and violence. Therefore, differential impacts of disasters on men and women can be measured at all stages of pre disaster, disaster and post disaster phase.

When disasters take place, women become the worst victims, mainly because of lack of preparedness. As in the case of the most recent tsunami, most of the dead were women, since women did not know how to swim, climb trees and most importantly, women died trying to save their children and family (Oxfam, 2005). In 1993, during the Latur earthquake in Maharashtra, fewer men died relative to women because due the warm weather, men were sleeping outdoors (Byrne and Balden, 32). In the Pakistan Earthquake of October 2005, more women died and got injured, mainly because of higher seclusion practices, gendered division of labour and mobility restrictions on women.

During the earthquake, my wife came out of the house, but unfortunately, she went back in to bring our young baby. Suddenly, the house collapsed. She is now totally paralyzed and a dependent woman. She cannot move nor do anything. Who will cook for me and for the children, as my children are very small? (*Hearing their voices: Women and Children in Earthquake affected areas of Pakistan, IUCN*)

Lessons learned from natural disasters in the HKH region over the past decade and a half illustrate how physiological vulnerabilities, socio-cultural and economic marginalization and gender stereotypes make all the difference in who gets killed and who survives, outlining the main reasons why women get disproportionately affected during and after disasters (Mehta, M., 2007).

The Hurricane Mitch in Honduras and Nicaragua, known as the storm of the century in Central America, gave rise to many female-headed households. The possible reasons given by the women and the NGOs were "Some men died and many more have abandoned their families, either temporarily or permanently. Some men seem to have left to seek better employment elsewhere in the country

while others appear to have migrated outside the country. Others are reported to have left one partner for another, in a less affected region of the country. (Gomariz, 1999)” In the post disaster phase, male migration forced women to shoulder the productive, reproductive and community responsibilities, while still undergoing the mental trauma caused by the disaster.

Although disaster affects both men and women, it has gendered impacts. Due to lack of preparedness, lack of information and exposure, women constitute the highest number of casualties and dead. The post disaster reconstruction phase is crucial, as it can cause new vulnerabilities or “second phase disasters”, without sensitive rehabilitation and relief projects. Women can face varied challenges in the post disaster phase, such as physical, mental and sexual violence (El-Bushra: 1998).

We are threatened by the camp personnel for even a small mistake. We fear a lot due to their harsh behaviour. For e.g. yesterday, they announced that any woman found sitting outside the bathroom for washing hair or any other purpose, their naked pictures will be taken and published in newspaper.

(IUCN, Khwendo Kor, 2006, Hearing their voices: Women and Children in Earthquake affected areas of Pakistan)

V. Recommendations

As the process of migration is a gendered process in the HKH, it is thus important to have gender analysis in the development process. Few recommendations are given below to address the pertinent social issues of the Himalaya today.

- (i) Extensive Research and documentation of different types of migration,
- (ii) Focus on those left behind with efforts to provide enabling / supportive environments -socially, economically, legally.
- (iii) Enhance family members’ access to credit.
- (iv) Strengthening of local-level capacities through trainings.
- (v) Identification of group formation as the core tool to strengthening rural women’s economic and social capacities, and facilitating the formation of such groups through which farming, health and other related information can be disseminated
- (vi) Lessening the burden on women.
- (vii) Informed choices on a range of topics like investment options, reproductive health, HIV/AIDS etc.
- (viii) Strengthening ability to capitalize remittances, contributing toward mitigating the vulnerabilities of women who stay behind to a range of different threats

VI. Conclusion

The vulnerabilities of mountain communities are vast and gendered impacts of the severity take longer time to recuperate. Mountain women face more hardships than their male counterparts. Although mountain societies are considered to have lesser discrimination on women, disparity still persists, unabated. Due to much vulnerability of mountain communities, women's issues do not always get much needed priority and usually there is also a tendency of gender issues being further marginalized owing to other concerns (considered more important) of the mountain communities. The state laws that are often gender discriminatory or blind, fuels the vulnerabilities of mountain women. The state laws are also often in contradiction or insensitive towards the indigenous cultural practices.² A gender blind mountain development agenda has more potential to create an unsustainable development than gender discriminatory policies.

ICIMOD has set Gender Mainstreaming as an important Action Initiative and has thus engendered the mountain development with special focus on equipping mountain communities with research information and scientific knowledge, assessing gendered impacts of migration, forming regional mountain women's networks, capacity enhancement, advocacy and policy interventions.

Natural disasters and armed conflict pose serious threat on the mountain societies today. Wars in the name of religion, caste, ethnicity, class and gender that are apparent in the Himalayan countries have led to increased migration of men from the rural mountains to urban low land areas. Although gendered impacts are difficult to analyze across the Trans boundary, common conclusion from migration can be drawn. Migration on one hand has had positive impacts on women giving them economic empowerment, whether temporarily or permanently; on the other hand, it has increased the workload of women, adding to their increased vulnerabilities. To ensure sustainable mountain development, women must be allowed to play a full part in all stages of the process, thus underpinning the importance of engendering the mountain agenda.

² A case of a Rai woman, from the eastern Himalayas of Nepal, who was convicted for killing a cow, since cow sacrificing is against the dominant Hindu religion.

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