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Mountain Women of the Hindu Kush-Himalayas

The Hidden Perspective

Despite their important role in production systems of the mountains, very little data exists on the situation of mountain women and analysis of gender relations in the Hindu-Kush Himalayan region. Scanty information can be gleaned from anthropological ethnographies, but, otherwise, studies on the status of women in the countries of the region are by and large focussed on women from lowland and urban environments. What is clearly missing is a description of their situation told by mountain women themselves. To learn of this 'hidden perspective', 17 female researchers from eight countries of the Hindu Kush-Himalayan 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 during 1996 and 1997. The issues discussed below are based on the findings of this research.

Introduction

An analysis of gender relations and the situation of women across the Hindu Kush-Himalayan (HKH) region provides a complex of confusing and sometimes contradictory evidence. At one end of the spectrum, there is evidence of the almost universal subjugation of women in these societies, a theme most notably emphasised by Sherry Ortner in *Making Gender: The Politics and Erotics of Culture* (1996). On the other hand, there is also an enormous diversity of concepts and symbolisations of women that suggest more equitable relations between men and women in mountain societies.

Status of Women

Evidence of women's secondary status is seen from three types of data: 1) elements of cultural ideology and statements that explicitly devalue women, 2) symbolism that may be interpreted as implicitly devaluing women (such as defilement and pollution), and 3) socio-structural arrangements that exclude women from participation in the realm of the highest powers of the society. Any one of these types is sufficient to demonstrate female inferiority in a society.

Anthropologists assert that no known genuinely egalitarian society exists today, although they have searched (and hoped) for its existence.

In all of the societies studied, there is evidence of some discrimination at at least one of the three levels described above. In most areas, women are excluded from some rituals or positions of religious or political authority. Even in the Tibetan Buddhist communities of Tibet, Bhutan, and Nepal, women are not allowed to serve as the high lamas who command respect in their societies. And women's participation in the highest levels of decision-making within governments is absent in all but a very few places.

And yet, in comparison to the situation in the lowlands and urban centres of the region, mountain women in general fare better in terms of status. They are afforded more autonomy, freedom of movement, and opportunities to assert their opinions and influence in important household and community decisions and play a larger role in entrepreneurial activities. The cultural ideals of purity and pollution are less rigid than in the lowlands. Yet mountain women too are constrained by some sociocultural arrangements that circumscribe and restrict their options. These arrangements and their influence are described below.

Gender Ideologies

Gender relations are constructed and maintained through a complex array of factors that are formed according to social, cultural, and historical circumstances. Gender systems are linked to larger social formations, such as religion, ethnic identity, etc, and so are reflected in social traditions, but they are also dynamic in nature, influenced by forces of social and economic change. As such,

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existing gender relations are frequently reinterpreted and negotiated as traditional societies are confronted with new influences and symbols of change. The study of gender relations in the HKH region, therefore, must begin with a look at the historical factors that affected the formation of gender relations in mountain areas,

Gender relations and the 'proper' roles for women were definitely influenced and/or defined by the systems that outlined the governing principles for society and history. Until modern times, in the HKH region, these systems were determined primarily by indigenous religions and the dominant religious/ philosophical ideologies of Confucianism, Buddhism (*Mahayana and Theravada*), Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity and the leaders who interpreted and represented these religions to members of the non-religious society. All of these world views influence gender meanings: to varying degrees, these religions circumscribe women's status and roles in society. And yet, it should be noted that women's status and roles are not determined solely by the presence or absence of positive gender ideologies. Even the existence of sexually egalitarian concepts in religious beliefs and practice does not necessarily signify the existence of sexual equality in social structure. That gender representations in religions are not uniform suggests that individuals selectively embrace or disregard various religious views. Issues of power and individual actions lead us to question universal acceptance or influence of religious ideologies.

Emergence of Nation States

Patterns of female/male relations in pre-state societies have always displayed some degree of asymmetry between the sexes. There is always a prestigious ritual or ceremony from which women are excluded, and men's power is exerted through control of the marriage system. Yet women in these less structured societies have a greater degree of autonomy of action and power over some areas of their lives. These societies do not posses an ideology of female purity, nor is seclusion of women practised as a means of controlling sexuality.

These traditional systems were disrupted with the rise of statehood, wherein a radical shift of ideology and practice occurred. State-related religious thought, such as existed in Hindu, Islamic and Christian societies, established the dominance of the patriarchal extended family as an administrative unit with accountability to the political-economic structure of the state. Senior males (patriarchs) assumed absolute authority over all members of the household, and women were brought under systematic control. Fathers became not only economically responsible for their families, but also legally and politically heads of households. The idea developed that a father was directly responsible for the behaviour of 'his' women; his honor and that of the family were at stake.

The ideology of gender that permeates most policies of the modern state, i.e., that women should be primarily housewives and secondarily, workers –has justified a discriminatory wage structure, double work burdens, and unequal access to technology, information, productive resources, credit and training. When the gender ideologies of the state converge with those of fundamentalist majority communities, women have little chance of resisting the enforcement of norms of behaviour, action, and dress without violent redress (Agarwal 1988 and Saigol 1997).

Western and Development Ideologies

The idea that Western gender roles that are rationalised by beliefs about the central importance of women's role in birth and child-bearing are the 'natural' ones is used in support of a male ideology that has pervaded colonisation and more, recently, development (Rodgers 1980). The imposition of the Western gender model largely accounts for the identification of women's place as in the domestic sphere. Through the domestication of women in terms of housework and childcare, women are restricted from education and employment opportunities; this restriction is rationalised in terms of the future domestic careers that await all girls as wives and mothers.

"The pattern today is very similar (to that of the colonial administration); of all the professional employment opportunities available to women, perhaps the most severe forms of discrimination are to be found in the international sphere, including development planning for the Third World" - Rodgers 1980.

The division of labour that identifies women with the domestic sphere and men with the 'outside world' of the modern economy is both the cause and effect of male monopoly of important positions in the socioeconomic hierarchy and their control over the main social institutions. This differential treatment of men and women is a process of discrimination, which was evident in the traditional societies under colonial rule. This Western male ideology was passed on from the Western men in charge of colonial administration and institution–building to their local counterparts – educated elite men.

In the past five decades, the successors to the colonial rulers have been expatriate development planners and experts. Development institutions were and are still male-dominated at the professional level. This tendency is reinforced by the fact that national counterparts in the national elite are men educated in Western–type institutions. Suffering from the myopia of labelling women's subsistence work 'domestic', and therefore trivial, development planners do not recognise the critical contribution of women's work to agricultural production and the very survival of the farm family.

Mountain Women's Lives

Descriptions of mountain women's lives are found in the ICIMOD case studies from Afghanistan (Deh Sabz and Istalif District), Bangladesh (Khagrachari Hill District), Bhutan, China (Tibet Autonomous Region, Sichuan and Yunnan Provinces), India (Darjeeling District/Sikkim State and Kumaon/Garhwal regions), Nepal (Humla and Nuwakot Districts), and Myanmar (Southern Shan State)—eleven cases from seven countries (Gurung, J. and G. Rana, eds, forthcoming). These cases are of situations in developing countries, amongst the poorest in the world. Even though two of the countries represent 'rising economies', the mountain regions of those countries are still marginalised in terms of government inputs into their development; there are still substantial gaps between the best of government intentions and actual implementation.

Topography/Environment/Demography - Many of the papers cite the harsh topography and climate as having an impact on women's workload. Environmentally, it is seen that degradation of resources and consequent shortages of fuel and fodder have a negative impact on women. Sites vary in the distances quoted for procuring fodder and fuelwood; all agreed that the increasing burden was on women. The increasingly common migration of men to urban centres and lowland areas for cash wages (Bhutan, Darjeeling/Sikkim, Kumaon/Garwhal) and the involvement of men in armed conflict (Deh Sabz /Istalif) are factors affecting women's heavier responsibilities in managing farms and households.

Access to Education - The lack of training facilities for adult women seems to have been a concern from the most developed of mountain areas to the least. Across all eleven cases, it should be stated that some areas were at the extreme end of the scale in access for mountain communities and others were at the other. Percentages range from the very marginal (Humla, Istalif/Deh Sabz) to about 55% of male literacy figures (Bhutan). Some have high schools and access to higher education, still others do not have a single school (Istalif/Deh Sabz).

The problem rests not only in availability of schools but whether or not girls are educated in them. For example, Humla has many schools, but the female adult literacy rate is 4.5 per cent compared to the adult male literacy rate of 33.4 per cent. There is a new campus for further education, the district also has 390 teachers (50% from outside), but only eight graduates—none of them women.

Health Facilities - Health is a prerequisite to all other facilities. And yet health was by and large seen in terms of mother and child health care and family planning. Considering the actual work burdens of mountain women, the focus of health programmes on reproductive aspects only is far too limited.

Legal Status - In some cases, laws have been codified for centuries, in others codification of laws is of quite recent origin. Without exception, mountain communities had their own customary laws; in many cases these have been superseded by national laws of recent codification. National laws may or may not deprive mountain women of very real status. Mountain women are usually disadvantaged by national laws in areas that are ethnically different from mainstream cultures. Having stated thus, one should bear in mind that legally one can find everything in customary laws—from laws that give mountain women substantially more (including land ownership) than their sisters in the mainstream culture (Tibet, Bhutan) to laws that restrict women to a status in law that is practically that of half a man (Afghanistan, where the application of the Law of Evidence under Shariah law reduces women's existence as a moral and legal citizen to that of half that of a man (Toor 1997).

Economic Production/Employment - The division of labour between the sexes in which the moment any kind of 'advanced' technology comes into play men take over (as in Sichuan) is a persistent pattern. It is this pattern that has led to men being the targets of agricultural development interventions that lead to cash crops, marketing, and increased incomes, whereas women are relegated to the same old drudgery of weeding and maintenance, planting and hoeing, fetching water and collecting firewood, and feeding the animals.

Income generating projects for mountain women are mostly farm and home-based activities which are low-earning and slow-growing; products of agriculture (Sikkim), animal husbandry (Darjeeling), non-timber forest items and local handicrafts (Bhutan) have largely brought minimal profits to women while more renumerative and dynamic enterprises are run by male entrepreneurs who have access to capital, credit, and larger markets (Papola 1998).

What the case studies do show is that mountain women have been deprived of investment in terms of education, health, and legal rights. Hence, the employment/economic status in itself is a synergy of all indicators relating to mountain women. Mountain women are over employed. The idea of leisure time has not even been conceptualised by development interventions that supposedly hold concerns for the quality of human life. An example of this is the often-repeated statement as an *a priori* for skills' training that *"women can earn income in their spare time"*. Yet one recent report on renewable

energy cited that mountain women sleep on average four hours in twenty-four. Renewable energy sources such as biogas and improved cooking stoves give them an extra hour or two's rest at most (Shrestha and Amatya 1998).

Political Participation - Although there are very few mountain women holding political positions in national assemblies, the numbers of women voting (Sichuan) and taking up leadership positions within local bodies, such as the Village *Panchayats* in India where 1/3 seats are reserved for women, are increasing (Darjeeling). In areas in which women have groups of their own, there is more participation. Yet, few of these groups are strictly political or advocacy groups—mostly they are centred around some task such as forest conservation or credit and savings. In many cases, women are simply too busy fulfilling household needs to find time for political participation. In some areas community users' groups of one kind and another provide a voice for women that also fulfills a basic felt need (e.g., forestry users' groups in Nuwakot and skill and literacy groups in Yunnan). Although these are not political in the sense of representation on a civic or national body, they provide the beginnings of representation over issues that concern women's lives.

Factors Related to Women's Self-Esteem - Women's self-esteem and confidence are influenced by many things, including gender ideologies, state –ascribed roles, cultural taboos and expectations, education and exposure to the outside world, cash earning abilities, roles in decision making and their own inner sense of autonomy, identity, and strength.

One striking finding of the research was that, in all but two of the case studies, the image of women in society and their self image were reported to be lower than those of men. Women in almost all areas stated that they did not feel as confident as men in their abilities to make major decisions and organize household and community events. Nor did they feel they enjoyed equal levels of status and importance in society. Even in the case of Tibet, where women are commonly portrayed as free-spirited and strong willed, the researcher observed a social mechanism that curtails female hopes and aspirations and instills in them a sense of secondariness and lower importance. Women of Humla stated, as is often heard from women of this region, *"We don't know anything, this is just how our life is."* Humlese women considered their position in society insignificant. Myanmar women think of themselves as 'only housewives', without the status that is granted to those who are participating in 'outside' activities. This is despite the high status of women reportedly provided by Myanmar custom and tradition.

Only women of the Chittagong Hill Tracts (Khagrachari) reported that they did not feel inferior to men, although even they were of the opinion that their image in society was less than that of men. The pride of Bhutanese women was also described as a quality that does not allow their self-image to be tampered with by their men folk.

As noted by the Kumaon/Garhwal researchers, women's perceptions of themselves differ over generations. Older women tend to support and justify existing male domination and their subservient roles as part of their cultural tradition, while younger women are more aware of the inequity of their status. As in Humla, both old and young, however, are so burdened by work in that environmentally degraded area that they feel resigned to their fates.

This is supported with evidence from Nuwakot where the researcher pointed out that the image of women in society as well as their self-esteem change as their own position in the household/community changes due to age, marriage, giving birth to sons, and acquiring daughters-in-law. Senior women often assume male-like positions of power and authority that can be used to oppress less-powerful women in the family and community.

In most of the areas, decision making roles differed widely, within both the household and community, and were influenced by many factors. The complexity of decision making was noted by more than one of the researchers.

Decision-making opportunities for women ranged from almost nil in Afghanistan, where women do not even decide what food to prepare for dinner, to central and western Bhutan, where women dictate if and how men can hire out their services and even lend tools.

Development Programmes and Policies - In government plans, researchers found the existence of many women-focussed programmes to address the practical and strategic needs of rural women, but found less evidence at the ground level that these had any impact or, in many cases, were even known to local women. In many cases, policies designed in capital cities with the best intentions had not taken local realities into account. This is

true for mountain men as well, as policies are often designed with the lowlands' situation in mind and therefore are inappropriate in mountain contexts (Darjeeling). Often mountain women's workloads and limited mobility made it impossible for them to take advantage of health and education services. Frequently, there was insufficient allocation of funds tied to the policy directives, so they became little more than expressions of intent. Even in China, with its focus on the provision of services to persons inhabiting remote areas, it was found that resources provided for stated directives regarding women's education and health were far from adequate (Yunnan).

By and large, significant gaps were noted by all the researchers between the stated policy and programme goals and the realities at the mountain community level.

The Hidden Perspective

No matter how much documentation we have concerning the situation of mountain women, the fact remains that we glimpse only a part of the story. For one thing, until after the second World War and the advent of the development era, these women were to a great extent, the women of 'other' cultures, hidden women. What we do not know of the lives of mountain women is probably more important than what we do know.

With the difficulty of eking out an existence in the mountain environment and the almost complete lack of educational opportunities for girls until recently, there have been no mountain women writers and poets who could provide us with a legacy of literature, poetry, and other documentation of their joys and sorrows, as is found in the case of lowland regions of India, Bangladesh and Pakistan, for example. It is very difficult to perceive what real changes have taken place in the HKH, over a period of say 30-40 years – the current development era – as we do not know what existed before.

This collective research on the situation of mountain women has raised many questions that we are unable to answer. Has the establishment and strengthening of the nation state and the accompanying codification of universal needs to supersede customary laws benefitted or deprived mountain women? Did these codified laws sense mountain people's needs or were they more in the interests of downstream actors' worldviews?

We also need to ask if mountain women truly suffer from low self-esteem? Are their roles as subsistence farmers and highland traders not valued by those dependent on them? Are there not, among mountain communities, expectations of self-sufficiency and autonomy on the part of individuals: men, women, and children, that are absent from the plains' psyche?

In cases in which researchers were told by women that they had lower levels of self-esteem, it seemed strange that, in all but three cases (Deh Sabz/Istalif, Kumaon/Garhwal, and Southern Shan State), these women were from ethnic groups having many customary practices that should have given women some additional status (Tibetans in Humla and Sichuan, Quiang in Sichuan, Naxi in Yunnan, Bhutias and Sherpas in Darjeeling, Bhutias and Lepchas in Sikkim, Tamangs in Nuwakot) over their more orthodox Hindu/Muslim sisters.

So are their statements about self esteem genuine or are they saving 'face' by not letting the outside know what goes on inside? The famous inside-outside dichotomy applied to women's spheres of work could well apply also to the psyche.

Reports of lower self-esteem may also have been affected by the relationship between the researcher and the one being researched. These interactions were undoubtedly shaped by the context and by the politics of each actor's multiple roles and identities. The question of trust arises as well, as researchers may have appeared to mountain women to represent hegemonic powers. James Scott (1990), describing the exercise of power in nearly all public encounters between resource-rich and resource-poor, uses the term 'hidden transcripts' to describe the process whereby a portion of people's opinions, beliefs, ideas, and values are driven underground. That is, the normal tendency for those in subservient positions to reveal only that part of their full transcripts to authorities in power-laden situations which is both safe and appropriate to reveal.

Could it be that mountain women seek to justify the gross neglect of lawmakers and planners by making the myth of inferority their own? To what purpose? Are they bearing the workloads, physical violence, and neglect of nation builders for the sake of the maintenance of the family and community? Does nurturing and caring for family members to such a great degree make them personally feel more secure or fulfill a spiritual aim? Or have they internalised religious beliefs and other ideologies to such an extent that they are merely obeying them as ruling factors in their lives?

Conclusion

Because of the predominance of less rigid religious beliefs, such as of those existing in indigenous systems and Buddhism, and the dominant role of women in the livelihood systems of the mountains, mountain women have traditionally been afforded more freedom of movement, independent decision-making and relatively higher status than women in the lowlands.

Perhaps due to the difficulties in eking out a living in a harsh mountain environment, women from highland areas historically needed to participate in agriculture and natural resource management.

The 'hidden perspective' and voices of mountain women must indeed be heard, loudly, in district and national capitals to counter the prevailing trend and to ensure that planners are not missing the mark by designing inappropriate programmes and policies that give only lip service to the needs and aspirations of mountain women.

Yet, through processes of the incorporation of mountain areas fully into nation-states and the accompanying influence of 'foreign' ideologies, mountain women's higher status is endangered. More conservative ideologies relegating women to the interiors of their homes are gaining popularity through the media, government and NGO development workers, and religious leaders.

What is evident, nevertheless, is that mountain communities could not survive if women were to reduce their responsibilities to take up their prescribed roles. *Purdah* (confinement inside the house) is an impossible strategy for women whose family livelihoods are based on the diversified management of land and water resources. Strategies of survival have always included the frequent absence of males for trading and herding purposes, and women have traditionally held responsibility for the maintenance of the farm and household in the absence of their men, and participated in small-scale trading and income-earning activities. If they failed to do so, things would fall apart; things would fall apart for men, for families, for communities, and for whole nations.

It is well-known that once substantial inequality has been established in a society, the self-interest of those who benefit and have the greatest power will perpetuate and increase the divisions. Male biases in the development process are already built into the institutions, policies, and processes and show every sign of continuing, despite the increasing availability of data on the predominant roles that women play in the primary sectors of economic development (Rodgers 1980). Yet, the overall picture is that women themselves are partially responsible for the maintenance of power inequities. Women's low levels of self esteem and confidence are very much related to the continuity of unequal gender relations and lack of attention to their needs by development planners. New channels of communication and accountability must be opened between the elected/appointed officials and the female constituencies of mountain areas. But for this to happen, this group of women must put aside their shyness and speak with confidence and conviction to development planners and government leaders; as they well know, they cannot entrust outsiders to speak on their behalf.

The bottom line is that men are leaving home in droves and mountain farm households are still surviving. For how long and at what levels is a question that deserves an answer. But there is little doubt that we must pay attention to the voice and hidden perspective of women. Whether or not they readily admit it, mountain women are the bedrock of their homes and communities, upon which mountain survival and development depends. The sooner they feel confident and are given the opportunities to make decisions affecting these processes, the sooner mountain areas can leave behind the status of second class, backward regions.

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