



Women of the mountains: gender roles, relations, responsibilities and rights

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Celebrating Mountain Women (CMW), the global conference on mountain women, was held in Paro, Bhutan, from 1-4 October 2002 to celebrate the International Year of Mountains. CMW was organised around five theme areas; viz, i) Natural Resources and Environment, ii) Entrepreneurship, iii) Health and Well-being, iv) Political, Legal, and Human Rights, and v) Culture and Indigenous Knowledge. The five themes were examined and presented within the framework of Policy, Practice and Research to bring out relevant issues, gaps, and best practices to help define the way forward.

Based on 43 papers, prepared, submitted, and presented at the conference, this chapter attempts to present an overview of gender roles, relations, responsibilities, and rights vis-à-vis resources in the mountain regions. We looked at the women's roles and changes in gender relations. While we began with a broad set of enquiries, throughout the review of the papers we refined our approach and analysis in order to explain women's contributions to upland economies and changing gender relations through the voices of mountain women and men. Further, we attempt to do something more than deconstructing scholarship on mountain societies by simply retelling women's stories about their struggle for livelihood and resistance to androcentric dominance.

The Making of Gender Relations

Gender relations are complex, dynamic and socially embedded, having many interlocked dimensions. Social and cultural traditions of women's exclusion from community management confers authority and prestige on men. Women may often exercise considerable influence in certain areas of community life, but it is men who hold virtually all formal and informal positions of power and decision-making under patrilineal systems. In some matrilineal systems, women have direct power in terms of maintaining lineage, have rights over

ancestral property, and hence have more effective control. They have knowledge of rituals and are often the spiritual heads of the community. For example, the Syiem Sad among the Khasis of North East India and the Bobolizan among the Rungus in Sabah, Malaysia. Under these circumstances, women enjoy privileges similar to those accorded to men in patrilineal societies. Women's role in the upkeep of the family, community, and the tribe as a whole is central and respected. Gender relations are more egalitarian wherein male members often assist women in carrying out some domestic and reproductive responsibilities. Women enjoy considerable space within the household and the community to make decisions about resource use based on their role in production, their special knowledge of forests, and their place in cultural and religious life. Unfortunately, maintaining this position of power is difficult, particularly in the face of pressures from the state in favour of institutionalising patriarchy and its norms.

The centralisation of forest management by states weakened an important source of women's power in matrilineal societies. When forests were under local control, women played an important role in forest-based production, and enjoyed a high status based on their knowledge of forest flora and fauna. Women also played a central role in religious rituals with strong ties to the forest. While women certainly continued to use forests after centralisation, they often had to do so clandestinely and in short visits. In addition, many forests were changed into monocropping area that provided few of the resources that women controlled historically. With limited access to a much altered forest, women's ability to fend off forces of patriarchy was reduced.

Among most patrilineal societies, women's major responsibility in reproduction and/or income-earning does not necessarily lead to social empowerment or gender equality within the household. For example, in the more male-dominated society of Enzong village (a mixed Naxi and Han village, 8 km from the town of Lijiang) women have no right to forests, land, or trees, all of which are inherited from father to son, and forest distribution is carried out on the basis of the (male) head of household. A woman, after marriage, acquires access to her husband's forest. Furthermore, women are allowed neither to climb trees nor to cut trunks even if these are needed for house construction. Spirits were supposed to reside in trees and a menstruating woman might pollute the tree and thus bring down the wrath of the forest spirit.

In rural Nepal, among the Tamang community, the past few decades have seen a decrease in number and influence of women shamans who possess traditional knowledge and spiritual powers. Nepal's mainstream religion is Hinduism which gives women a subordinate position. Tamangs are ethnic minorities among whom women enjoy a better position. However, to be modernised and accepted by the mainstream as equals meant applying Hindu standards of socialisation. Hence, women who possessed such knowledge (shamans) were thought of as 'witches'; women's dignity was reduced within the family; and the burden of household duties was increased. In some cases the family would restrain the woman from working as a shaman, due to fear



of social ostracism. As the film viewed at CMW also showed, many such women were harassed and beaten, becoming mentally unsound.

Male domination in the mainstream Han political system of China introduced and imposed a new perception that it is men who control both social knowledge and family resources. Both the Han and the Tibetan Lamaism became the feature of the male dominant gender system. In traditional Mosuo society, Lamaism was the single most powerful challenger to the Mosuo matrilineal ideology and gender constructs. While the Han Chinese bureaucracy tried to 'civilise' the Mosuo largely through administrative measures, and without much success, Lamaism took a much more subtle approach and transformed the Mosuo conception about maleness and femaleness. During the early 1990s, it was observed that a household having more than two sons would have to give at least one to be a Lama (Kelkar and Nathan 2003). The Lama mostly lived in the upper part of the house and did not do any kind of physical labour, not even cooking for himself. His food was prepared by his sister or mother or brother and sent to him in the upper chamber.

State-sponsored colonisation by the dominant religio-cultural regimes like Hinduism, Christianity, Lama Buddhism, and Confucianism are noted as having had a destructive effect on indigenous egalitarian gender relations. They disordered the position of women to make them subordinate to men and reinforced their exclusion from political participation, spiritual life, and community decision-making. Among the Naxi of China, for example, the matrilineal system was abolished and replaced by a mainstream Han Chinese patrilineal inheritance system; marriage for love was discouraged and replaced by arranged marriage; and the Confucian values of a woman being subordinate to her husband, father, and son were promoted. The effect of these measures was to deny women opportunities to participate as full members of the mountain community.

For many 'closed' mountain dwellers, the major agency of change in their local cultural system and gender relations came through colonial education of the younger generation. Missionary or religious schooling, later followed by public and secular schooling, were the limited means and sources of modern education. During the expansion of Christianity among the Rungus in Sabah in Malaysia, from 1952-59, as Porodong noted in his paper, the missionaries would directly deal with the village headman, which left out the 'bobolizan' (a woman priest and healer, who used to hold absolute power in the community) who could not then assess the consequences of the external forces on their traditional religion and social system. Further, the missionaries set up primary schools, farm schools, and home science schools, in addition to dispensaries for free medical and health care. 'Home science' schools systematically channelled women into domesticity, denying them their original role in productive and political life and limiting the future of the role. Free health care undermined the role of the 'bobolizan' as a healer, and consequently her social status and political power. The impact of these new interventions such as modern schooling on the old values, principles, and gender relations was

inevitably strong, subtle, and irreversible by most standards. It silenced and suppressed the traditionally acknowledged women decision-makers, the indigenous ways of knowing, and their language and rituals for knowing. In the name of western/modern knowledge, development and a 'civilised culture,' male power emerged and the hierarchy of gender relations.

Notwithstanding the above, as a result of gender mainstreaming and gender sensitising efforts, some changes did occur in traditional institutions in South and South East Asia. A significant change, however, is noted in Latin American countries, with the recent adoption of policy measures in the context of the dual-headed household. Such a measure has greatly strengthened women's position within the family, as assets acquired during marriage will be jointly owned and managed by the woman and man, both of whom are recognised as heads of the same household.

From Silence to Recognition

To describe mountain women as silent observers of the male appropriation of traditional power and resources oversimplifies both women's voices of resistance and the range of ways in which they have expressed resistance. There are mountain women who would speak publicly about the growing male dominance and control of resources, even as they challenged central control over the forests they depend on. Women continue their struggle on two fronts – against state-sponsored patriarchy that deprived them of their basic rights to natural resources which give them power and authority traditionally and the growing influence of patriarchal ways and norms that suffocate them at home.

Of course, many women are silent but would speak if power inequalities and inequities in rights to resources did not obstruct them. Some choose not to speak publicly but instead exercise informal resistance in what James Scott describes as 'off stage defiance' (1985, p. 23) 'infrapolitics of subordinate groups....a wide variety of low profile forms of resistance that dare not speak in their own name' (1990, p. 19). There are also women who keep quiet and show nothing but compliance to male dominance; this is a result of fear of insult and physical assault. Gender-based domination is a complex issue.

In the case of women, relations of domination have typically been both personal and community-based; joint reproduction in the family and home without any control over resources has meant that 'imagining an entirely separate existence for the women as a subordinated group requires a more radical step than it has for poor peasants, working class or slaves' (ibid.). It is not surprising, then, that women do not publicly speak out against their oppression and subordination, since like any other subordinated group, they may be socialised into accepting a view of their position and interest as prescribed from above, in maintaining the male hierarchy in gender relations.

Yet, many of the women we spoke with recognised the need to struggle on two fronts. First, against the social authority of men and women's exclusion from



participation and decision-making in the organisation of their community. Second, against the encroachment of the state on forests and other productive resources of their communities. Mountain women expressed anxiety about the diminishing land rights of women, as it is critical for their survival given the growing feminisation of mountain agriculture. In the Asian, African and Latin American highlands, as increasing numbers of men and boys leave their communities as economic migrants – some to war and others never to return – women, girls, and widows must fend for themselves and the family. In the absence of proper legal rights to land and other property many women are helpless and cannot explore the avenues of credit and agricultural technologies to improve and increase productivity.

A study of the Alps (Zucca 2002) points to the interesting phenomenon of women's historical revolt against their subordination: women's response to centuries of repression against their "being treated like goats" was to flee from the priests, the villages, the fathers, the brothers and the husbands. In recent years, however, a new economic concept of 'the identity-economy' has begun to take shape. Many women have decided to revive traditional economic practices (animal breeding, handicrafts, harvesting and transforming of herbs, hospitality) making use of new methods, combining them together in a global perspective and managing them by means of the latest, state-of-the-art methods of communication. This has resulted in the rebirth of entire valleys.

In Colombia since 1998 it has been required by law to reserve 30% of senior executive and judicial positions for women (Angela Castellanos). Similar laws have been passed in countries of South Asia; 33% of seats in local government to be kept for women and 33% in Panchayat Raj local governments in India.

The Gender Asset Gap

The gender asset gap with respect to ownership of land and trees is significant. In some countries of Latin America, Africa and Asia, women can become landowners, but only in marginal numbers (20 to 25%). Moreover, there is ample evidence that, when both boys and girls inherit land, boys always inherit more land and of better quality. Gender socialisation that women do not need greater amounts of land than necessary to meet household food security, combined with the peasant household logic of concentrating land in the male line, has been a powerful factor even in the bilateral inheritance practices of Latin America.

Women's inequality in land ownership is largely related to the male preference in inheritance, male privilege in marriage (i.e., patrilocality, cooking, cleaning, and rearing of children and caring for dependents as the women's duties), male bias in community and state programmes in land distribution as well as gender bias in the land market. Such disparities in productive resources disallow women from participating in enhancing their capabilities, which further limits them from contributing to higher living standards for their families.

Despite subscribing to the concepts of gender equality and equity as part of the strategy for poverty reduction, women in most countries have continued to be largely excluded from State distribution of land and other productive assets, in addition to familial biases. State and market policies are largely guided by legal, cultural, structural, and institutional factors that define women as dependants on the male head of the household. Such predicaments perpetuate the existing gender division of labour that already views men's work as productive and women's work as 'duties', non-work (or reproductive) or at best 'temporary work'. It is assumed "that by benefiting rural households all members within them would benefit as well. Here we highlight the legal and cultural mechanisms of exclusion although all these factors are inter-related and have as their basis patriarchal ideologies embedded in concepts of masculinity and femininity." Notwithstanding, women's property rights were reported to be much stronger in Uganda and Kyrgyzstan as well as in most Latin American countries in contrast to South Asian countries.

A significant advance in favour of gender equality is a recent policy change which contains explicit mechanisms of inclusion: provisions for the mandatory joint adjudication and titling of land to couples and/or that give priority to woman household heads or specific groups of women (Deere and Leon 2001). Such a joint titling legislation has now been established in Colombia, Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Honduras, and Brazil. Joint titling represents an advance for gender equality for it establishes explicitly that property rights are vested in both the man and woman who constitute a couple. Dual-headed households in most of Latin America have both wife and husband legally representing the household and jointly managing the household assets.

Rural women value land the most among assets as land ownership offers livelihood security for minimum food requirements for the family, social security, and self confidence. The general value of owning assets that women can rent, sharecrop, etc and the bargaining power assets give them in negotiating their say in household decisions and in combating their subordination are well expressed in the statements of two landless women from rural Bangladesh: "If you have assets, everyone loves you," Kalpana, an articulate village woman. "If we have sampotti (property/assets), our samman (dignity/prestige) will be permanent. Samman is closely linked with sampotti," says Gul Akhtar, who has recently acquired 15 decimals of agricultural land. "When we have assets in our names, we will be respected and will have social and familial dignity. But this will not be easy. Our men do not easily agree to control of assets by women."

Natural resources and women

A case to be considered is the devolution of forest management in several mountain states. The process of devolution has failed to address the question of gender inequities and social inequalities and, therefore, in many forest societies resulted in promoting the interests of local elites by accumulating income and power under their control. Women were systematically excluded from ownership, control, and institutional management of forests and other



resources, which impaired even their limited access. Even in Nepal where User Group Committees of community forests are encouraged to let women participate and hold office, male dominance in decision-making is normal and 'tokenism' the way. Hence, mountain societies have experienced widening socioeconomic disparities and deepening gender inequalities. Three major constraints in the development of mountain peoples relate to (a) interventions from outside which have by and large been extractive, (b) the mountain peoples' own fragile production structures, further threatened by these extractive external relations, and (c) weakening institutional mechanisms. Women are worst affected as they have little or no say in community affairs and their contact with the outside world is minimal; and when they do come into contact with external factors, these are usually exploitative.

Despite all the rhetoric about joint management of forests and despite their very strong dependence on forest food resources, women and men have very little control over the way forest resources are used. Nevertheless, inclusion of women in forest decision-making does make a difference to the administration of local management and to gender relations.

Women decide...

In the Bajawand Block Committee in Bastar, Central India, with a membership of 3,000 covering 25 villages, the woman President, Kalavati, introduced a major change in the tendu leaf collection cards – now they have the name of women, who are the primary collectors, on them, rather than those of the male heads of household. As a result the membership of women in the cooperative has increased from just 10 to 90%. As a result, women are better able to control the income from tendu leaf sales and have more influence over the cooperative's decisions on sale conditions and tendu leaf management. The new norms, though still problematic in their functioning, do open opportunities to regain some of the lost control of women over forests and over their own livelihoods.

Policy-making concerning development of mountain women is far removed from the reality of indigenous societies. A number of women pointed out the lack of adequate recognition of women's role in Joint Forest Management of other natural resources. Several papers indicated two pillars as the backbone of mountain economy: forests and women. Devolution has failed to create an impact on the political capacity of women.

Well-being of mountain women

Mountain areas in the Hindu Kush-Himalayan region have some of the highest infant mortality rates and deaths during childbirth in the world. Gender was found to be the most significant determinant of malnutrition among children. Shortage of water and inadequate sanitation cause many diseases among mountain women and men. These are coupled with poor health infrastructure, high illiteracy rates among women, and gender-based violence, e.g. 'honour killing', persecution of witches, and trafficking of women.

A number of papers from South Asia made explicit and implicit reference to poor provision of schooling for mountain women and girls. Some strategies suggested to overcome gender-insensitive cultural norms included securing approval of community leaders (usually all men); creating an educational environment sensitive to cultural norms (free of gender stereotyping; gender responsive technology and science text books); and employing women staff: teachers and trainers. It was also suggested that in building or strengthening capabilities (healthcare, education, employment / self-employment) attention should be given to the personal conditioning and position of women and girls over the institutional and cultural norms. The presence and implementation of supportive legislation for women's right to education and asset security empower them to take decisions.

Economic empowerment

Discussions about entrepreneurship among mountain women began with the case of Bhutan, appreciating the largely matrilineal pattern of inheritance in the country. By and large women have a better status in Bhutanese society, however, their weakness, as anywhere else, lies in the burden of household responsibilities, lack of mobility, lack of training, skills, and exposure to markets.

In another matrilineal society (the Khasi in Meghalaya) women frequently find themselves at the mercy of more powerful traders who control the movement of goods in the market. Also, in many cases a lucrative business of a woman is passed on into male hands because of the marginalisation of the daughters from production. With some exceptions, in a wool-based enterprise in Uttaranchal in India, as mountain communities move into the monetary economy, subsistence roles are developed and women's status becomes increasingly eroded with marketing processes and structures. Women as self-employed or owning a business are more concentrated in retail trade and services. There is, however, some change in this trend. Women are becoming financially independent, seeking inclusion in the labour market and control over the products of their labour.

In East Khasi Hill villages in March 2000, it was reported that, in many cases, in recent years, Khadduh (the youngest daughter who has the obligation to provide support and succour to all members of the family) has begun to assert her claims to full management and ownership rights over parental property. Conditions for such a claim came up when the uncle (the mother's brother) or the brother of a Khadduh stealthily but unsuccessfully signed away the family land and/or trees for his personal benefit. Women's engagement in income generation/employment, when the opportunity cost of women's labour is recognised and she brings in money, is welcomed and men reportedly are willing to share housework and the care of dependents and children.

Tourism and gender relations

Studies that have followed the growth of the tourism industry have focused upon the motivations of tourists. Relatively little attention has been paid to



human institutions and understanding of gender relations in the communities that receive tourists. For women in the receiving communities, the economics of tourism are seen in sex tourism: “female bodies are a tourist commodity” (Bolles, p 78). While sex tourism is an emerging phenomenon in Yunnan and does need examination to check the growing trade in women’s bodies, it is, however, only one of many roles women play in the tourism industry. The tourism industry has also provided various decent livelihood opportunities for women. In addition to having the sole responsibility for rearing and financially supporting their children and other dependents, Mosuo and Naxi women work as hosts, tourist workers, housekeepers, boat rowers, craft and snack vendors, small entrepreneurs, and managers of cottages, guest houses, and night clubs.

Tourism means a higher level of income, though not necessarily for all. The satisfaction of needs through consumption is possible because of the higher income. A new system of production, like tourism “means disruption, but it also means survival and much more” (Goody 1998, 197). Survival, as we will see below, is not only on a material level but also on a cultural level, as cultural practices become means of earning an income.

The embedded violence of trade in women’s bodies does raise the question: What has been done to change women’s gender identity of subordination, including that of sexual subordination? Have the progressive, gender-sensitive policies attempted to use the threat point to dismantle patriarchal powers and structures that deny poor, rural and indigenous women control over their lives?

Women’s movements in the south as well as the north seem to be divided over the issue of sex work and the sex trade. We do not wish to discuss these here. We, however, would like to say that the only way to understand this particular form of trade in women’s bodies is to understand this practice as an aspect of masculine domination. The masculine domination legitimates a relationship of domination by embedding entitlement to women’s sexual services in the biological nature of man. We know by now, largely as a result of feminist analysis, that the inculcating of such masculinity in men’s bodies is a social construct. We are faced with the challenge to institutionalised strategies to efface the masculine power and “turn the strength of the strong against them” (Bourdieu 2001).

Culture and indigenous knowledge

Mountain women’s work and knowledge is central to the use, conservation, and management of natural resources, especially water. There is a growing trend towards acknowledging the role of women in the provision, management, and safeguarding of water. Women as producers of food, educators of children, and protectors of family health and ecosystems are most directly concerned with water and health care. Women usually perform the bulk of tasks involved in agricultural production and maintenance of trees. But in planning and management of projects in the community choice of technology, maintenance of natural resources, as well as indigenous local organisations, there are few examples of the effective involvement of women.

Women have extensive knowledge about the nutritional and medicinal properties of plants, roots, and trees, including a wide knowledge of edible plants not normally used, but which are of central importance in coping with shortages during climatic disasters. Existing forms of development, however, have introduced a process of devaluation and marginalisation of indigenous knowledge and skills, which in turn are likely to lead to a gradual eclipse of this knowledge.

Development and erosion of knowledge systems are subject to social, economic, and political forces that facilitate the consolidation, circulation, and transmission of particular forms of knowledge while eroding others. The introduction of mainstream development programmes into mountain communities has reportedly resulted not only in the loss of land, but, also, more significantly, in the decimation of their unique knowledge, culture, and identity and in the decline of women's social position. However, the realisation of an ecological crisis and the problem of sustainability have brought about limitations in the systems of knowledge on which the present development has been based. This has had a number of consequences, with regard to both the sources of knowledge and the methods of enquiry.

This analysis is based on the premise that gender differentiation is inherent in all knowledge systems as a dynamic and therefore varying entity. Production of knowledge in both its traditional and modern forms has increasingly come to be controlled by men. Male control over knowledge production and knowledge systems is crucial in the subordination and marginalisation of women.

There are two processes operating to complement each other: first, women come to be excluded from production of knowledge and, second, whatever knowledge women do possess (largely a result of their natural resource management and health care activities) is not acknowledged or given legitimacy.

Significantly, in the promotion of cultural relativism, ethnicity has been used to defuse women's demands for equity and empowerment in the home and outside. The denial of distinct forms of gender relations and making sense of things in the mountain communities are a form of ethnocentrism. The scientific basis of these practices needs to be uncovered, so that the reasons for a practice are known (Chambers 1989). Often the practices and decision-making rules are turned into rituals and various sanctions are invoked to justify their practice.

The conference participants explicitly stated their opposition to the use of cultural values for reinforcing rather than eradicating discrimination against women. While understanding cultural practices requires a knowledge and understanding of that culture, it does not follow that one has to accept the philosophical basis of that culture in order to be able to appreciate the value of the practice.



The failure to include questions of social justice (whether between different countries in the global order, or between groups in a society, or between the genders) leads to only partial and therefore distorted scientific accounts and policies. Incorporating such social issues into setting the agenda for and carrying out scientific research and its technological applications will require, as Harding (1993) argues, the development of “stronger standards of objectivity.”

Concern with questions of sustainability has led to increased attention to the knowledge of indigenous peoples and their possible applications. However, we have to address the questions of the gender and social hierarchies developed in these indigenous systems of knowledge in order that they might serve the purpose of a counterpoint (rather than to romanticise all aspects of indigenous communities) to the present systems of gender and social hierarchies. Addressing questions about the elimination of gender and other social hierarchies is part of sustainable development.

Conclusion: Policy Intervention, Research and Action Gaps

Whether formally or informally, directly or indirectly, establishing new norms requires political struggle. Mountain communities have gone through protracted struggle to establish patriarchal norms. Simultaneously, and often in the same communities, there are struggles to overcome these patriarchal norms. External agencies too have a substantial role to play in bringing about democratic functioning of the home and society. What is necessary to note is the dialectical relationship between internal struggle and external enabling rules and decisions.

The conference discussion highlighted the following priority areas of concern for the way forward.

- Mountain women’s rights, including human political, economic, property, environmental, health, cultural, intellectual and other rights, and need for adequate training in claiming these rights
- Promotion of gender equitable laws, policies, and programmes that facilitate participation of mountain women in the management of natural resources and secure access to the ecosystem goods and services
- Promotion and strengthening of equitable representation of mountain women in all decision-making bodies, and advocating their participation in politics, negotiation, and decision-making processes at all levels, including in conflict prevention and resolution
- Need to focus on reproductive and sexual health problems, including HIV/AIDS, and encourage involvement of men in prevention of these problems; eradication of trafficking of women and children in poor mountain areas; eradication of domestic violence; and promotion of social programmes aiming to overcome violent cultural practices

- Need for research and dissemination on mountain women's indigenous knowledge in cultural and religious systems, natural resource use, traditional farming and conservation techniques, and health practices
- Economic valuation of mountain women's work in management of natural resources as well as promotion of ethical businesses in mountain areas, related training programmes, as well as social services to meet the needs of mountain women
- Promotion of physical and social infrastructure (roads, electricity, telecommunications, markets, health care, schools, etc.) that are sensitive and responsive to women's needs and enhancement of income generation and entrepreneurship among mountain women, reducing their workloads and improving the quality of their lives
- Effects of Tourism on mountain women (and men) and strategies for strengthening women's local knowledge and practices in conservation of resources and women's equality and dignity
- The dual-headed household and its impact on women's empowerment / agency development, productivity, and development in general
- Culture and institutional factors that are barriers to women's effective participation – a number of papers talk about 'cruelty of social norms' regarding mountain women in central and South Asia, denying women access to education and resources like land and community decision-making. How structural changes are/can be brought about by addressing cultural/social constraints on women's inclusion. Further, much work is needed on positive interpretation of cultures and religions to advance gender equality.
- Need for gender budgets and increased budgetary allocation for mountain women's initiatives to make mountain development sustainable and meaningful to women.

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