



Improved labour-saving options for mountain women

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Summary

The study described in this paper looked at the activities of women in the mountains of Uttaranchal and Himachal Pradesh and available and viable options for reducing drudgery through a review of literature on the two topics of labour-saving options and income generation. The structure of economic activities, organisation of work, and technologies used in activities in which women are involved.

Women's work is arduous with long working hours, and the intention behind a thorough review of the literature was to find options that would help in reducing workloads, eliminating drudgery, and coming up with economic activities that are alternatives to traditional farm labour. The author focused on the following.

1. Organisation of work: home-based or site-based; household and non-household; farm and off-farm etc
2. Productive or unproductive: does it entail additional income-generating avenues?
3. The type of technology (i.e. manual or mechanical) used by women and the extent to which it saves time and labour
4. Small-scale economic activities and drudgery-reducing technologies promoted
5. The nature of changes or impacts if any brought about by different work patterns/technologies
6. The extent to which options can be replicated or upscaled

The geographical area covered in the study included the hilly regions of India in general and Uttarakhand – the hilly region of Uttar Pradesh and the state

of Himachal Pradesh in particular. The scope of the review was quite wide, as all mountain areas were considered, but only NGOs and institutions in the geographical areas given were actually listed (as resource organisations?). Sources of literature were libraries, private collections, and authors themselves. Field visits and personal interviews as well as structured questionnaires were used. Email discussions were also a feature of the research.

The first section lists books, articles, and project reports along with abstracts; the second section is an inventory of organisations working in labour-saving options in the mountains in Uttaranchal and Himachal Pradesh; and the third section deals with important or core issues and ideas emerging from the survey of literature and from the detailed discussions with activists and experts.

In summation the study was useful in three ways: it identified useful documents; it identified organisations; and it identified crucial issues in the search for labour-saving options for mountain women.

Issues and Ideas on Improved Labour Saving Options for Mountain Women

Issues in women's work are linked to the geography, topography, environment (social as well as physical) and politics in mountain areas; all of which are factors that have long marginalised mountain people. Workloads are extremely heavy (in terms of both calories expended and time consumed); and in turn this leads to health problems, particularly for women on whose shoulders a great deal of the onerous work falls. The text divides women's work into sections to identify labour-saving options. The findings for each section are briefly given here.

Agriculture

In Uttaranchal there is widespread male migration so the women are responsible for the family farms. As in most mountain areas the topography is steep, but here the rainfall is high too (1200-1600mm) and the soil type ranges from sandy to sandy loam and does not hold water for long, resulting in the decline of soil moisture that affects the production of agricultural crops. A traditional mechanism to counter this problem is the addition of large quantities of farmyard manure to the fields. This involves a forbidding range of activities from collecting litter from the forest to spreading it in decomposed form in the field. And women do this in addition to all other agricultural and domestic activities. A series of technologies are listed to reduce the labour and time involved in agricultural work: rainwater harvesting, mulching, kuhl renovation, improved agricultural implements, better and closer grain mills.

In addition floriculture and fruit and vegetable growing, particularly vegetable seed production, are seen as possible income-generating activities for



women. For both of these, water-harvesting tanks and improved composting methods are recommended.

Animal Husbandry

Animal husbandry is a traditional area of work for women. The author recommends special training for women in improved techniques for raising livestock. Such courses could be supported in extension by revolving loans to purchase livestock; improving local livestock breeds; provision of good veterinary care; dairy technologies and stall feeding; and use of medicinal plants for livestock to supplement veterinary care, as well as para veterinary care.

Although farming and animal husbandry are major sectors, the text also discusses the use of primary forest resources and home-making. Forest resources are important because collection of fuelwood and fodder takes up an inordinate amount of time (on average seven hours a day in winter and nine hours a day in summer) because of the long distances covered (sometimes as much as 30km) and the loads carried (20-50kg).

In the case of fuelwood and fodder collection, afforestation and grassland improvement around villages are recommended. Fodder grasses on terraced risers and silage arrangements would also improve women's lot. Most of these could be improved grasses.

The crucial factor in home-making is water supply, not just for drinking but for cooking, washing clothes, cleaning homes, and so on. Improved water harvesting technologies, for example, rainwater harvesting, are proposed as well as recharging groundwater resources and water-lifting technologies.

Improved energy devices, e.g., improved cooking stoves which act in two ways: fuel consumption, is reduced and, secondly, indoor air pollution is reduced. Introduction of appropriate architectural technology, blending the traditional with the modern to reduce fuel consumption for heating purposes.

There are a number of improved utensils that conserve energy, decrease smoke; and there are also alternative energy sources such as biogas. It is not clear to what extent these are being used.

Women's health is touched on briefly. Obviously many of the issues impact on women's health. Sanitary toilets are essential as is clean water.

Improved gender-sensitive technologies can reduce women's labour in the mountains. In the context of income generation, there are a number of options suitable for women and in which they have a comparative advantage: fruit processing; medicinal plant cultivation and processing; beekeeping; off-

season vegetable cash crops; basket and furniture making; and aromatic oils, ornamental flowers and plants. Obviously to kick start such endeavours, credit groups need to be established.

Conclusion

Need-based policies and programmes are an essential component for such interventions.

Things are changing in the economy and there is infrastructural growth. However, the male outmigration and unchanging social system with its gender biases and increase in women's work loads as a result of male outmigration places women in a disadvantageous situation. Something is needed at the level of policy and law-making; attitudinal change is equally as important as economic and infrastructural change and, indeed, one rarely takes place without the other. All of the alternative technologies and labour-saving options discussed need inputs, and women, who are poor, can least afford them. Technologies also need to be adapted to different locations. Women need access to resources to bring about change in their condition. They need land ownership and access to as many resources as men. Women's participation and empowerment to participate in community organisations established by the government are essential, and the social system does not lend itself to giving women a voice. Hence these are issues not only for researchers but for policy-makers and law-givers also.

