



# introduction

## The Women of the Mountains

Women all over the world must still fight to be accepted as equals, to have their values recognised as relevant, and to overcome the disadvantages of coping with the double and triple burdens of household, child rearing, and paid work. But mountain women have a further challenge to face, they belong to societies that are already marginalised, seen as 'poor, backward, and unsophisticated', cut off from the mainstream benefits of society and from positions of influence in policy development and decision-making. The hardships of living in remote areas with difficult terrain and exposed to the vagaries of nature are compounded by the hardships of being women, of struggling to ensure that families survive, are fed and warm and cared for, whilst living on the edge of the habitable.

Mountain women play a crucial, and in many respects, dominant role in natural resource management, agricultural production, income generation, and in ensuring the well-being and the very survival of mountain families, and are an enormous source of indigenous knowledge related to daily life and the use of the resources around them. But is this knowledge recognised, respected, valued, and incorporated in policies and modern 'development' thinking? Many mountain regions are rich in economic resources such as minerals, timber, hydropower, and fresh water. The scenic, cultural, and sacred beauty of mountains draw increasing numbers of tourists and pilgrims to remote mountains all over the world. But have mountain women benefited as much as men, or people from the plains, from these local resources? Can they benefit more? These are questions that were discussed at the gathering 'Celebrating Mountain Women' which is at the core of this book. They must be used as constant reminders to help reorient, focus, and shape policies and strategies.

It is clear that in mountain regions, women tend to be less well nourished, more under-compensated for their labour, and more under-represented in formal decision-making bodies than men. Strategies for survival have always included the frequent absences of men for trading and herding purposes; hence, women have traditionally been responsible for the maintenance of the farm and household, in addition to participating in small-scale trading and income-earning activities. In

recent history, the rising numbers of armed conflicts in mountain areas have further exacerbated women's already heavy responsibilities.

The religious beliefs among indigenous peoples of the mountains are generally less rigid than in the plains. As a result, mountain women have traditionally been afforded more mobility greater independence in decision-making, and higher social status than women of the lowlands. Yet, the current social and economic integration of mountain areas into nation-states coupled with its influences is rapidly eroding some of these positive aspects.

There is little real understanding or documentation of the contributions made by mountain women, or of gender relations in mountain regions. The studies that have been carried out are neither well known nor accessible, and policies remain inadequate. Thus far, processes of historical, economic, and social development have been told almost exclusively from a male perspective. Thus, any discussion on gender relations must start from the so-far neglected perspectives of women and these must reach policy-makers to encourage them to make necessary changes. It is evident that male biases in the development process are built into institutions, policies, and processes. Unless actively redressed, the same scenario will continue, notwithstanding the increasing evidence and data on the predominant role of women in the primary sectors of economic development and natural resource management.

## **Why CMW?**

Recognition of the problems of mountain women in many regions of the world coincided with the opportunity presented by the International Year of Mountains 2002. The immediate challenge was to provide a platform that could bring mountain women together and highlight their experiences and aspirations. This platform would then provide a base for building a community of concerned individuals who can promote the interests of mountain women within development circles, in the marketplace, and within decision-making bodies. It will help build on the networks of mountain women that have slowly begun to emerge with women finding a common cause in their double marginalisation.

The International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD) proposed that it host an international gathering around the issues of mountain women as one of its events to mark the International Year of Mountains 2002. This was one result of ICIMOD's commitment to focus on mountain women, made during the Mountain Forum Council Meeting in Cusco, Peru, in 1999. The idea of calling the event a 'celebration' was deliberate. While mountain women have hard lives, are undoubtedly exploited, discriminated against, and disenfranchised, they also have enormous resilience, strength, knowledge, and power. It was these latter aspects that the gathering wished to capture and take forward.

Renzo Uccelli



Anupam Bhatia/ICIMOD



Pradeep Tulachan/ICIMOD



Giacomo Pirozzi/IFAD



Mountain women have many occupations. Clockwise: spinning in S. America; preparing pigment for Thangka painting (demonstration at CMW); increased self-reliance through improved cropping in East Africa; animal husbandry in the Himalayas

The meeting was designed so women would have opportunities to learn about each other's experiences, and be exposed to modern communication techniques, such as the Internet, which could enhance their lives and livelihoods. By bringing together women from diverse backgrounds who have a shared love and passion for the mountains, the meeting enabled the creation of new and improved networks that can work together in creative problem solving.



### **Celebrating Mountain Women**

**The year 2002, formally declared 'International Year of Mountains' by the United Nations, was an important year for mountain people and issues. 'Celebrating Mountain Women' as the gathering came to be called, was the only global event that focused on women. It was the first event that sought to give a platform to the previously unheard voices of mountain women from around the world, and the first international gathering devoted to their issues and concerns. It brought together some 250 women and men from 35 countries to celebrate the drive and spirit of mountain women, to discuss critical issues at hand, and to search for new ways forward.**



Another very important objective of CMW was to create new coalitions and networks to work on policy issues related to mountain women, and an effort was made to identify and connect groups of mountain women and intermediaries. Throughout CMW, there was a great deal of interaction between intermediaries, mountain women, and policy-makers.

The gathering created a space for learning, connecting mountain women so they might share their experiences, exchange knowledge, and bring to light gender issues from different mountain areas of the world. Viable and compelling lessons were shared that are applicable across different regions where degraded upland environments and threatened food security affect the livelihoods of mountain people.

### **The Organisation of CMW**

The concrete planning for CMW started in May 2001, when twenty-three women from the five major regions of the world – North America, Latin America, Europe, Asia-Pacific, and Africa – met in Kathmandu to discuss and prepare for the gathering. Five women, representing the mountain women of each of the five regions, were chosen to form a global Steering Committee to assist and guide the CMW Secretariat at ICIMOD in Kathmandu, which was responsible for all the planning, organisational, logistical, and follow-up arrangements.

The Secretariat prepared the way by collecting and disseminating information on the situation of mountain women and identifying groups



Animated discussions in the CMW sessions (all photos Anupam Bhatia/ICIMOD)

in mountain areas who could learn from each other. The meeting was advertised widely to help promote a broad range of participation. CMW was seen as an effective means of increasing interaction between development players and mountain women, an interaction promoted by judicious selection of participants.

It was realised early on that the media could provide considerably help to CMW in meeting its goals. A professional group, the Women's Media Service, was appointed to manage the media representation and links. Press releases before, during, and after the meeting were used to inform the public about the activities, discussions, and follow-up. Another group, the Missing Link, provided documentation services.

Participants prepared background papers prior to the meeting as a basis for the discussions; the drafts were provided to participants on a CD-ROM. A compilation of the main parts of these papers is now being prepared for publication.

The Royal Government of Bhutan (RGoB) generously consented not only to host CMW but also to waive the normal \$200 per day visitor's fee for all the CMW participants. The Ministries of Agriculture and Foreign Affairs played important roles in organising the event in Bhutan.

Many partners and donors joined together to support this important event and help women from all over the world participate; the major ones are listed on the inside front cover.

### ***The programme***

At the start of CMW, the participants gathered at the conference venue in celebration outfits to watch a procession led by the Prime Minister of Bhutan and the Director General of ICIMOD, which was followed by traditional Bhutanese greetings and a blessing ceremony.

The body of the meeting was made up of parallel workshops on five major thematic areas. These are described in more detail in the next section. These intense discussions were balanced and complemented by a diverse range of additional events including a mountain women's film festival, mountain costume show, a market place with exhibition stalls and booths, presentations, photo exhibitions, informal sharing of experiences, and story telling. A considerable effort was made to use this unique opportunity to start work on developing new networks, new ideas, and new alliances amongst mountain women worldwide.

Mountain women's products from around the world were displayed at a 'Market Place' set up in the grounds of the CMW venue. Many participants left Bhutan with an eclectic collection of goods from all over the world, most of which were made by mountain women. The products on sale ranged from clothing and jewellery, arts and crafts, and pottery, to spices and herbs, and food items and came from countries as far apart as Bhutan, Bolivia, Columbia, Ethiopia, India, Mexico, Nepal, Pakistan, Peru, the Philippines, and Swaziland.



Costumes from South Asia, Central Asia and South America in the parade  
*(all photos Anupam Bhatia/ICIMOD)*

A Mountain Costume Show was held to celebrate the huge range of traditional clothing which is an integral part of mountain people's culture and history. The event underlined the unique beauty, design, and style of the clothes. It helped boost the pride of mountain women in their cultural inheritance. Films on mountain women from around the world were screened at the Mountain Women's Film Festival organised as a parallel event to the meeting.

At the end, the gathering drafted and endorsed the 'Thimphu Declaration' as a message from the mountain women to the global mountain community that was to meet at the Bishkek Global Mountain Summit (BGMS) in October 2002. The Declaration proved an important tool for beginning the dialogue on what has been achieved and what still needs to be done to better the lives of mountain women everywhere. The gathering was closed most appropriately by an address from a young mountain woman – Her Royal Highness, Princess Chhimi Yangzom Wangchuck, in Thimphu the capital of the Kingdom of Bhutan.



***In the end....CMW was but a beginning of things to come. It was a way to bring the world's attention to the issues of mountain women, to provide a platform for them and to ensure that their voices do not go unheard in this important International Year of Mountains. It was an opportunity to celebrate the wisdom, hard work, lives, and contributions of mountain women towards the stewardship of the mountains, mountain resources, and their families.***

