

HIMAWANTI

*Women of the
Hindu Kush-Himalayas*



Edited by Anupam Bhatia
Artwork by Param Meyangbo

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The International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD) is an international organization devoted to development of the Hindu Kush-Himalayan region covering all or parts of eight sovereign states. Active areas include Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, India, Myanmar, Nepal, and Pakistan. The centre is located in Kathmandu, Nepal. The primary objective of the centre is to promote the development of an economically and environmentally sound mountain ecosystem and to improve the living standards of mountain populations.

HIMAWANTI

Women of the Hindu Kush-Himalayas



HIMAWANTI -
WOMEN OF THE
HINDU KUSH-HIMALAYAS

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- The staff of ICIMOD who were as usual quiet, diligent, and cooperative in the complex logistics of organizing the workshop and in helping ensure a caring workshop environment.

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The regional workshop was indeed a historic event in the process of ensuring that grassroots women emerge to occupy their rightful place in the sustainable management of natural resources in the Hindu Kush-Himalayas.

We would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge the support of the key institutions and donors in helping us make this dream possible.

Anupam Bhatia
Natural Resources Management

Foreword

This document recounts the work of a remarkable group of women. In 1995, a group of seventeen grassroots women of the Hindu Kush-Himalayas envisioned the formation of a network that would enable them to share their collective knowledge and experience about natural resource management in their mountain homeland. The perseverance and dedication of these women resulted in the building of HIMAWANTI, the Himalayan Grassroots Women's Natural Resources Management Network. This organization has grown to include grassroots mountain women from Pakistan to Bangladesh, with branches as well in Bhutan, several states in the Indian Himalayas, and most districts of Nepal.

After years of planning and advance preparations, in October 1999 HIMAWANTI succeeded in bringing together over 200 women from throughout the Hindu Kush-Himalayan region. They met at Budhanilkantha in Kathmandu for a Regional Workshop entitled "Focus on Grassroots Women in Natural Resources Management in the Hindu Kush-Himalayas". The meeting was a true landmark. It was the first time such a large number of grassroots women from the Hindu Kush-Himalayas came together to share their experiences and evolve strategies to strengthen

women's access to decision making regarding natural resource management. The gathering was a giant step in coordination and strengthening of communication and alliances.

The idea of HIMAWANTI first arose in May 1995 during the First Regional Community Forestry Users Group Workshop organized by ICIMOD's Participatory HIMAWANTI Resources' Management Programme. The importance of women's empowerment in contributing to integrated mountain development in the Hindu Kush-Himalayas is a key issue that emerged from the Users Group Workshop. The group recommended the development of mechanisms to increase women's genuine participation in decision making relating to natural resources management.

Feeling the need for a separate institution to deal with the particular problems and constraints women forest users face, women participants resolved to form a Regional Women's Community Forestry Users Group Network. Within one year, HIMAWANTI was born as a network that would function not only for forest related issues, but also for the protection and development of natural resources such as water and land. HIMAWANTI's formation has come to be seen as a major outcome of the Users Group Workshop.

Early in 1997 the decision was made to organize a large regional meeting to promote wider networking of grassroots women engaged in natural resource management and to work towards enhancing women's participation in decision making. The women worked for over two years to make that dream a reality. An important aspect of the pre-workshop process was the organisation of several national and sub national consultations. These meetings, held in Bhutan, Nepal, Uttar Pradesh (now Uttaranchal) and Himachal Pradesh in India, and the Northern Areas of Pakistan, served to bring together socially and economically disadvantaged women from these areas to discuss relevant issues and to identify participants for the regional workshop. In some places, such as Bhutan, the national consultation on "Enhancing Involvement of Grassroots Women in National Resources Management" was the first meeting ever organized specifically for women farmers. More such meetings, for instance in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh, have followed from this regional workshop. Thus, the meeting's crucial importance in the movement to uplift and empower Himalayan women cannot be overestimated.

The workshop aimed to increase the leadership

and decision making capacity of rural women in natural resources management, protection and utilisation. Its major objectives were to provide a forum for grassroots women to share experiences and evolve strategies, to strengthen communication and alliances among rural women of the Hindu Kush-Himalayas who are involved in conserving and managing natural resources. Discussing policies, rules and regulations regarding natural resource management in the different countries of the region, they worked on developing means to enhance women's access to decision making regarding natural resource management. The workshop also provided a forum to discuss the establishment of HIMAWANTI in Nepal and India so that women from the other countries present could develop their own plans of action to establish national level branches of HIMAWANTI in their countries.

This publication is a result of the workshop. The situation of women, their needs, the challenges they face, and how they are campaigning for change - all were discussed at length in the supportive atmosphere of the workshop. These are now presented here in a simplified and visually stimulating form in three languages that we hope will appeal to and inform a wide audience including the grassroots women who remain our

primary constituency. This approach to presenting a workshop outcome is a marked change for ICIMOD and the start of a new emphasis on looking for creative mechanisms for communicating knowledge.

Country-level action plans and strategies were developed for all five countries represented at the workshop, and, in the ensuing years, women from each country have been working hard to carry them out. For example, following their participation in the regional workshop, women from North East India started organizing their own HIMAWANTI network. In April 2000 a workshop attended by over 100 women from six states of the North East, Sikkim, and North Bengal was planned and held in Shillong, Meghalaya, under the auspices of the North East Network.

HIMAWANTI's organizational and management capacities continue to grow. A Regional Planning meeting held in January 2000 in Rangamati, Bangladesh, was attended by regional members from Bangladesh, Bhutan, and Pakistan; regional committee members from Nepal; and state members from Uttar Pradesh, Arunachal Pradesh, and Meghalaya in India. The regional office in Kathmandu has developed into a true hub of the network's activity and has worked to ensure the network's sustainability.

ICIMOD takes pride that HIMAWANTI today is a formally registered autonomous organization with a secretariat based in Kathmandu, and that we were able to play a modest role in having conceptualised, nurtured, and fostered the institutional development of the organization. This particular workshop was a major milestone in this development which laid out a clearly defined path for HIMAWANTI in the future. At the time of writing, I have just learned of the formal registration of the first sub-national chapter of HIMAWANTI in Uttaranchal, India, and I understand that similar processes are ongoing in Pakistan and Bangladesh.

ICIMOD is proud to be able to present the work of this dynamic and wonderful group. I hope that this publication will inspire others to follow in their paths, and offer them the support they need.

J. Gabriel Campbell
Director General, ICIMOD

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