

## **WOMEN OF THE HINDU KUSH-HIMALAYAS**

Over generations, women have lived their lives in various areas of the Hindu Kush-Himalayas. They have made their homes on hill flanks, valleys, and lowlands of this mountainous region. Although largely diversified in their history, language, and traditions, these women from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, India, Nepal, Myanmar, and Pakistan share closely related challenges and rewards.

Theirs is a lifestyle that is deeply embedded in agrarian work. To them, nature is sacred because it has given them a wealth of knowledge which has been passed down from generation to generation. These are centuries-old practices of farming, animal husbandry, and household work.

The Hindu Kush-Himalayan woman's responsibilities are many. She cooks, cleans, washes, and looks after the children. She collects firewood, fodder, and water. She manages the livestock and assists the men on the farm. She makes the soil ready for farming and plants the seeds. She helps to reap the harvest and to thresh the crops.

Whether it be the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh or the deserts of Northern Pakistan, Hindu Kush-Himalayan women adjust to living conditions specific to their terrain. The woman who lives in remote areas experiences isolation and lack of basic amenities. She ekes out a living, surviving the rigours of a harsh landscape. Some women weave, make handicraft products, prepare pickles, raise silkworms, etc. These activities help them to supplement their family's income.

The Hindu Kush-Himalayan women are women of substance. Their inspiration is the love and respect they have for their land, hills, and mountains.

### *Natural Resources and How They Influence a Woman's Life*

Natural resources play a significant role in shaping the life of the Hindu Kush-Himalayan woman. From a very young age, she begins to gain practical knowledge on natural resources, and she fulfils her family's basic needs – food, water, fuel, and fodder – mostly through the use of natural resources.

Many women spend up to 18 hours a day on household, agricultural, and forestry activities. In some places, they have to walk long distances to collect water. Some suffer health problems from

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physically demanding tasks (heavy workloads and long hours spent in forests collecting fodder) and are at risk due to poor accessibility to health services.

Sometimes the cultivation of steeply terraced hillsides does not produce sufficient food for her family. And if her village experiences soil erosion or flooding caused by deforestation, the problems of the Hindu Kush-Himalayan woman aggravate. Especially in arid climates or during natural calamities, she and her family have to look for alternative solutions to survive scarcity.

The role of the Hindu Kush-Himalayan woman is not limited to household- and field-work. Some women use natural resources to start small businesses and become entrepreneurs. They do vegetable gardening; mushroom or herb cultivation; weave baskets, bags, cloth from natural resources like bamboo or produce locally made paper. They sell their products in the bazaar or to regular clients and retailers.

Despite the varied goals and aspirations of the Hindu Kush-Himalayan women, to every one of them, natural resources are their lifeblood.

### *The Need for Women to Influence Management of Natural Resources*

In the past, other development issues outweighed the importance of natural resource management, and this resulted in the exploitation and deterioration of mountain environments. The crucial role that women need to play to improve the situation was also undermined.

Forests now occupy almost 40 per cent of the land in the Hindu Kush-Himalayan region and tree-cutting has greatly increased the soil content in major rivers like Gandaki, Brahmaputra, and Ganges. Occasionally, investors encroach land and water resources for tourism related projects. In many places, men in government agencies and at the local level make decisions regarding the management of natural resources without consulting people at the local level. A report prepared by a Himalayan region specialist stated that 50% of the water resources belonging to the Karnali riverside and Himachal Pradesh had dried up.

This is why, unless women make an effort to be part of the decision-making and management process, conserving and sustaining natural resources in the Hindu Kush-Himalayan region will become a most difficult if not impossible task. The lack of awareness among the Hindu Kush-Himalayan women towards natural resource management can have far-reaching consequences. It can destroy the

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*Many women who work up to  
18 hours a day managing natural  
resources receive little respect  
for their hard work from their  
family or the government.*

Maya Devi Khanal, HISP/WAN/1





Women are being politically empowered. National and district authorities are encouraging women to participate in programmes. Women are advocating, lobbying, planning, and making decisions in local- and national-level bodies. In Bangladesh, women's participation in politics has increased due to the reservation of seats for women in parliament. In Himachal Pradesh, India, the reservation of seats for women in local elected bodies is 33%. This has increased the number of women representatives as chairpersons and VDC (Village Development Committee) members.

They are becoming economically empowered and are also participating in non-formal educational classes. In some areas of Northern Pakistan, many women's financial dependence on men has lessened due to AKRSP's (Aga Khan Rural Support Programme) skill development programmes. Also, under the programme's initiative, a substantial amount of money has been collected through the contribution of a little money from every woman participant. Loans from this collection are provided to grass roots' women interested in entrepreneurship. In Khawatin, a vocational training centre provides women tailoring and tutorial classes. Through this centre, women have also learnt how to prepare vegetable seeds and raise chickens. In this way, many women in Northern Pakistan have access to more income generation opportunities than in the past.

Similarly, in Bhutan, the National Women's Association concentrates on income generation activities for rural women. In Meghalaya, India, the role of women is changing and, in Nepal, women are running handicraft industries, schools, and colleges.

## *Regional Issues and Challenges*

### **1. EDUCATION**

Since birth, the woman of the Hindu Kush-Himalayas is discriminated against because of her gender. Educational opportunities are not prioritised for her because she is expected to work in her husband's house and not make use of her education. In some cases, parents feel that the investment that their daughter's education requires will benefit someone else's family and not theirs.

This is why, the women's literacy rate is comparatively lower than men's in several Hindu Kush-Himalayan countries. In Bangladesh, the literacy rate is only 32% and in Chittagong Hill Tracts, the literacy rate of women is much less. In Nepal, the total number of educated women is 25%. Although

*The single challenge before women is placing themselves in the mainstream of the development process. This is possible only when women become educated.*

-Hon. Chitra Lekha Yadav, Deputy Speaker  
Lower House of Parliament, Nepal



women have begun to demand equal educational opportunities, the results could have been better. Furthermore, only a limited number of adult literacy programmes are reaching women at the grass roots'. Initiatives like Bangladesh's Women's Development Policy have been established to encourage girls to attend school. The policy allows them to study up to class 10 without having to pay admission fees.

Women who are illiterate are more likely to be unaware of their legal rights when it comes to managing natural resources in their countries. Many of these women have few alternatives in choosing work that is less risky to their health. Education is an important regional problem in the Hindu Kush-Himalayan region.

## **2. RELIGIOUS AND SOCIOCULTURAL PRACTICES**

For generations, it has been traditionally accepted that the Hindu Kush-Himalayan woman plays a secondary role to men - whatever the circumstances - and her contribution to her family is taken for granted. In such an environment, she experiences a lack of freedom and mobility. She does not receive support in making decisions regarding her home and living area. Many experience difficulty in expressing themselves openly in front of men and, in many instances, the community is not serious about women's opinions. Although the Hindu Kush-Himalayan woman is more involved in using natural resources and can contribute to important policy-making decisions at the local and national levels, her capabilities are overlooked.

In Afghanistan, the situation is critical. Women are not visible in any sector and the maternal mortality rate has increased by more than 50% from 1975 to 2001. In Arunachal Pradesh, India, women live in a patriarchal society where men govern their decisions. In Uttarkhand, India, many women are not allowed to participate in the planning and management processes of a village project. In Nepal, women become untouchable during their menstruation. They are not allowed to enter temples or certain areas inside the house. Their husbands also do not eat the food they cook during this period. The rate of foeticide and infanticide in several Hindu Kush-Himalayan countries is alarming.

In Northern Pakistan, a joint family system prevails in which men are the main decision-makers and their wives have to listen to them. Women are expected to speak less about their ideas and thoughts. Women's health issues are also poorly addressed. Since religion has a strong influence in the country and disapproves of family planning practices, more than 85% of childbirths are carried out through traditional means.





The Hindu Kush-Himalayan woman's economic dependence on her husband makes it harder for her to break away from preconceived notions. She is vulnerable.

### **3. PROPERTY RIGHTS**

In some Hindu Kush-Himalayan countries, women are unable to exercise rights over issues related to her family's land. In Bangladesh, although the law protects women's property rights, in actuality many women still hold no power over property rights and only a small number of women are land-owners in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. In Meghalaya, India, although the youngest daughter of a family gains rights to some property (her parents' house as well because they become her responsibility), in practice her brothers and maternal uncles exercise rights as the real owners. In Nepal, women do not have access to property rights. An unmarried woman receives property after becoming 35; however, this arrangement changes if she gets married.

### **4. POLITICAL RIGHTS**

In some Hindu Kush-Himalayan countries, women are not provided provisions for political participation. In comparison to India, women in Pakistan are politically backward. In Nepal, half of the total population is made up of women; however, they are discouraged from joining politics and taking on responsible roles at the district and national levels. The House of Representatives and the cabinet have a very low representative of women members. In the Terai, women are dissuaded to participate in the electoral process for the position of the VDC (Village Development Committee) chairperson and in many instances, even those who are elected experience a power transferal from her to her husband. In Uttarkhand, India, although the *Panchayat* (system of government) has a 33% representation of women and 2,236 women are chairpersons, they still face gender discrimination related problems.

### **5. WORKING STATUS**

Mostly women in towns or cities hold important positions in private and government organizations. Although women and men compete for the same job and pay in certain working areas, women's potential as good employees is undermined due to their gender. Often, even if women are given gender determined roles such as secretaries, they receive lower wages for the same amount of work.



Educated women in different parts of the Hindu Kush-Himalayan region are social workers, clerks, building contractors, teachers, health assistants, and doctors.

In rural areas, women's workload increase when their husbands leave the village to work in cities or neighbouring areas. Women also have to deal with food and fuel shortages during winter. They have to seek solutions in order to protect their crops, fruit trees, and vegetables from pests, different kinds of diseases, wild animals, and fires. In order to market their produce, they face a problem regarding transportation facilities. Many also lack organizational skills that could help them properly manage their work inside the house and in the fields.

## 6. POLICY RELATED ISSUES

Sometimes, women experience problems when policy-makers are not willing to listen to their concerns. In some cases, they are afraid to deal with government authorities. Sometimes organizational and bureaucratic policies of government bodies create hurdles. In these situations, environmental, poverty, and gender discrimination issues are poorly addressed at the local and national levels.

It is crucial for government bodies to decentralize decisions at the local level so that the needs of the local people and women are incorporated in the planning and implementation process of a new project. Otherwise, the project may experience problems in the short- and long-term

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### A Bhutanese Song

*Friends let us go forward,  
hearts and minds as one,  
this solidarity, this union,  
from darkness unfurl to dawn.  
Our happiness overflows  
as we gather here today,  
we give thanks to the Lord  
for the beginning made this way.  
Being here is God's precious gift,  
to our previous lives' good deeds.  
In earnest commitment let's join in,  
Let our voices be heard above the din.*

### *Challenges Faced by Women of the Hindu Kush-Himalayas*

In the coming years, Hindu Kush-Himalayan women will need to consolidate their efforts. For this, organizations like *mahula mandals* (women's groups), HIMAWANTI, and Aga Khan Rural Support Programme will have to sustain and expand their activities. These organizations have to prioritise the needs of the Hindu Kush-Himalayan women and base their strategies on women's rights.

Information has to be disseminated in specific areas to generate interest among women working with natural resource management. Women's organizations have to form long-term policies based on a clear vision. Where possible, amendments have to be made to their constitutions based on feedback received from members. Action plans and programmes have to be formed based on the project area's social, political, economic, and cultural structure. Organizations should also identify their weaknesses and strengths and seek assistance from environmentalists, legal advisors, and social workers.



Women organizations have to add impetus to their lobbying and advocacy activities. They should become strong pressure groups and gain the support of local and non-governmental organizations. They should develop their working capacity to attain international advocacy and lobbying standards and this will help strengthen and expand their activities on a larger scale.

Men's cooperation is vital. Unless women receive support from within their family and society (husbands, brothers, sisters, mother-in-laws, father-in-laws), they can never feel fully confident about themselves. This is why awareness programmes on gender equality are necessary at the local and national levels. Teaching gender issues to male dominated societies and, that too, structured on complex hierarchical systems is challenging. It means changing ingrained attitudes of people who are already prejudiced against women.

For the Hindu Kush-Himalayan woman, her greatest challenge will be addressing her own commitment. How far she will progress in the empowerment process will be determined by her conviction in giving herself, her family, and her society a future to look upon.

### *Some Actions for Change*

The Hindu Kush-Himalayan woman needs to be able to learn and understand her strategic contribution and role in natural resource management. She should be able to enhance and expand what knowledge she already has. For this, it is essential for women to become literate and educated. Governments must plan and design strategies that will prioritise education for women.

We need a sensitisation process aimed at the country's policy-makers. They, along with government agencies and non-governmental organizations, should have a clear idea and be committed to implementing programmes for women. Women's groups should make sure that policies are implemented. They should feel free to negotiate with their own governments and, when necessary, institutional and legal reforms should be introduced.

More women need to qualify for positions at the policy-making level. This will create opportunities for women's views and opinions to be assessed and incorporated in the decision-making and management processes.

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*Ultimately, our efforts will result in the production of sufficient amounts of food grains, fruit, firewood and different forms of energy from natural resources which can be used for domestic purposes.*

*-Rachhi Dhatt, Kashurba Mahila  
Uttaranchal, India*



In rural areas, forestry policies should clearly define the role of women in developing and managing forest resources and increasing their participation in forest users' groups. Women need to have easy access to decision-making opportunities during the design and implementation of projects. Community development schemes should focus on benefiting an equal number of female and male participants through proper study and assessment.

Today, for the Hindu Kush-Himalayan woman, natural resource management is not only about protecting and preserving natural resources, but also restoring them to their former conditions through wise and sustainable use.

### ***HIMAWANTI - A Case Study***

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*HIMAWANTI needs to expand its linkages to other Hindu Kush-Himalayan countries like Afghanistan and Myanmar.*

HIMAWANTI (Himalayan Grass roots' Women's Natural Resources Management Network) is one of the more important organizations that work with natural resource management in the Hindu Kush-Himalayan region. Organizations like these give structural support to many Hindu Kush-Himalayan women who believe in protecting and saving their environments through women's empowerment in natural resource management. These organizations prepare working strategies and action plans and form committees. Various programmes are also implemented, monitored, and evaluated and brainstorming discussions are held to assess the organization's strengths and weaknesses. HIMAWANTI exemplifies how Hindu Kush-Himalayan women are effectively empowering themselves in natural resource management through an organizational effort.

HIMAWANTI was established in 1995. At that time, a seven-member committee was formed in Nepal. A workshop followed which resulted in the formation of a committee with members from India and Pakistan. Meetings, discussions, and workshops continued. October 1999 saw a turning point in HIMAWANTI's institutional growth. A regional workshop involving more than 200 grass roots' women of the Hindu Kush-Himalayan region was organized to discuss pertinent issues related to natural resource management. Through this workshop, members from Bhutan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan, and India were able to establish good working ties and were resolved to take HIMAWANTI's work forward in their respective countries. Country plans developed during the workshop form the basis for specific activities appropriate in different areas of the Hindu Kush-Himalayan region.





*Women of the Hindu Kush-Himalayas* is the outcome of this workshop. The book essentially talks about the Hindu Kush-Himalayan woman: her life, aspirations, challenges, and action plans related to her empowerment in natural resource management. Much of the information inside the book is based on the many discussions that took place during the six-day workshop and its thirty-four artwork speak directly to readers. The book has focused on a reader friendly approach.

Today, HIMAWANTI continues to organize meetings, workshops, and seminars and network with different groups of similar interests. It has established branches in other countries of the Hindu-Kush Himalayas and the first sub-national chapter has already been registered.

Organizations like HIMAWANTI help to generate awareness and disseminate information regarding women's empowerment role in natural resource management. They especially prioritize the empowerment of women who are uneducated and who come from the village. In some instances, they have been able to initiate women to come together for the first time and encouraged them to participate in the empowerment process. Several positive changes have been observed in women. More of them are able to talk confidently in front of the public and manage their own organizations. They have been able to participate in national and international programmes and enhance their capabilities.

Workshops, conferences, and seminars help to strengthen the working capacities of these organizations. Held in different Hindu Kush-Himalayan countries, they provide women a forum for exchanging their experiences and learning about the empowerment role of women from other countries in natural resource management. Through the sharing of their expectations, dreams, and challenges, women are able to identify issues and problems they commonly experience and determine collective solutions. They are able to participate in group discussions and contribute recommendations for the development of common country-level strategies and action plans. Women groups or individuals also receive opportunities to build up alliances with each other.

Besides external support, income generation schemes, low membership fees, and voluntary labour contributions are among the different sources of income that help these organizations run their activities. Self-dependence will certainly give permanence to the life of these organizations as they continue to provide Hindu Kush-Himalayan women a strong foundation upon which their efforts can solidify.

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*The main thrust of women's empowerment process in natural resource management has to come from themselves; otherwise the whole movement will lose meaning in the long run.*



## *Looking Towards the Future*

Empowering the Hindu Kush-Himalayan women in natural resource management can have huge implications. It will mean that thousands of women from all walks of life will come together and unite in their efforts to face challenges and bring about actions for change.

This empowerment process will give meaning to the *Pani Milan* ceremony, an auspicious event during which women bring water from important rivers of their countries and pour it into a common vessel to symbolize their unity in diversity. No matter what caste or creed each woman is, she is foremost a Hindu Kush-Himalayan woman whose concern for her environment is real and heartfelt. The water that she has carried through long distances to share with her sisters signifies for her and her people an inherent sacredness of natural resources that they have revered for generations. Such ceremonies stress that political or geographical boundaries do not discourage these women from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, India, Nepal, Myanmar, and Pakistan from addressing their roles in natural resource management.

In the new millennium, women's groups all over the Hindu Kush-Himalayan region need to work steadfastly to network with each other and establish strong ties. They need to become the water of the *Pani Milan* ceremony. In political sectors, leaders, both women and men, in local, district, and national bodies will need to develop a sense of accountability. They need to base their actions on real concern, care, and commitment.

Challenged by issues ranging from child marriage to advocating for rights in different sectors, women will need to redefine their roles in their homes and environments. They will need to question age-old religious or sociocultural practices and determine resolutions that will empower them. This will result in action oriented processes during which Hindu Kush-Himalayan women must take on assertive roles. It will be their own willpower, courage, and struggle in challenging traditional prejudices within their families and societies that will help them to look beyond conventional horizons and make lasting contributions to the management of natural resources over time.

