

# Rural Women of the HKH: The Prevalent, Yet Marginalised, Farmers

J.D. Gurung

*International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development, Kathmandu, Nepal*

## Introduction

Mountain people rank amongst the most deprived of the world's population, and yet their stewardship of mountain natural resources is closely linked to the sustainability of life in lowland areas. However, the dominant role that women of these mountain areas play in natural resource management, agricultural production, and the well-being and very survival of mountain families, including children, has received little attention.

Few data exist on the situation of mountain women and of gender relations in the Hindu-Kush Himalayan region. Much of the data available in the countries in the HKH region has not been disaggregated by agroecological regions to give information on mountain people, much less by gender. This research was undertaken to address this gap by providing accurate data on mountain women's lives, and by examining policies specifically aimed at women's development and the field level realities that determine the effectiveness of these policies.

## The Situation of Mountain Women

### *Diversity of Gender Relations*

In general, isolation has been a feature of most mountain societies, although the trend is declining with the influx of modernisation. Mountain societies tend to have less rigid social structures and hierarchies than societies of the lowlands, where dominant religious ideologies have been more influential in determining social norms and mores. Because of indigenous beliefs and the dominant role of women in livelihood systems in the mountains, mountain women were traditionally afforded more freedom of movement, independent decision making, and higher status than women of the lowlands.

### *Common Features*

Certain features are common throughout the HKH region. Mountain people have historically been marginalised politically, socially, and economically, by the dominant lowland powers and have had little involvement with or control over national level decisions. The significant or even dominant role of women in the sphere of production, as well in the more conventional domestic sphere, is also a common feature. Other commonalities include patriarchy, impacts of environmental degradation, imposition of new values, and poor representation of women's interests at political levels.

### Patriarchy

Patriarchy, or the domination by males in society, is prevalent throughout the region. However, the degree of patriarchy varies due to the tremendous diversity of cultures. It is more pronounced in Muslim, Hindu, and Confucian societies, but still exists in Buddhist and Christian societies as well. In parts of Bhutan, Tibet, and some areas of north-east

India, matriarchal communities still exist, though these are increasingly coming under the influence of powerful external forces from lowland societies, including those of Hinduism and Christianity (Gurung 1998).

- Low self-image and self-esteem

From the time of birth, females are repeatedly reminded, in subtle and not-so-subtle ways, of their inferiority. Femaleness is considered to be a lower form of rebirth and a kind of negative force that can bewitch and bring harm to others (e.g., Ortner 1996). In all of the case studies, with the exception of tribal groups of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, women reported lower levels of self-esteem than men and a lower image of women than men in their society.

- Patrilocal residence

The patriarchal system is shaped by patrilocal residence and kinship relationships that force females to leave their natal homes upon marriage and live in unfamiliar surroundings under the control of their husbands' families. Most marriages are still arranged by parents, so the women must establish themselves amongst relative strangers, with little of the family support they enjoyed at home. The difficulties and hardships inflicted by mother-in-laws on new brides are well known in the countries of Nepal and India (ESCAP 1997; NPC Nepal and UNICEF 1996).

- Inequitable inheritance rights

The customary laws throughout much of the mountain region dictate that sons inherit the land and herds of their parents, while women inherit only movable goods such as jewellery and household items. Thus men are the owners of production. Besides the obvious inequity, such customs further hamper women's abilities to expand their livelihood options by denying them credit from financial institutions, as they do not possess the collateral required for loans (Ortner 1996).

### Environmental management

- Indigenous knowledge

As the dominant farmers, women have traditionally been the managers of crop germplasm and its diversity, through the testing, preservation, and exchange of seed through informal networks (Gurung, J. 1998). Their special knowledge of the value and diverse uses of plants for nutrition, food security, health, and income provides a balance to the market-oriented pressures that emphasise high yield and uniformity (e.g., Eyzaguirre and Raymond 1995).

- Decreased access to forest and water resources

The diminishment of forest and water resources due to environmental degradation has a marked impact on women, who are responsible for the collection and management of such resources, often forcing them to travel longer distances to meet their households' daily needs. To date, there are very few places where alternative technologies have provided non-traditional sources of cooking fuel or new methods of transporting water.

- Heavy workloads

Women of the HKH region bear substantially more of the domestic and farm responsibilities than their menfolk or their counterparts in the plains. The back-breaking chores of carrying water, fodder, and firewood up and down steep mountain slopes are carried out daily,

consuming large portions of the women's day and energy. In some parts of the Uttar Pradesh hills, women's work seems to have reached an inhuman level, leaving observers to ponder on how long women existing on a limited caloric input and often in a pregnant or lactating state can physically continue to bear this load.

- **Absent men**

Male out-migration for short-term or long-term periods is increasing throughout the region as families struggle to find ways to sustain themselves and their farmlands amidst decreasing crop yields and during periods of scarcity. In many circumstances, major decisions are delayed until the 'household head' returns for his annual visit home. The absence of males does provide women with more opportunities to participate in public life, as when they are able to represent their households in forest-user group meetings in the hills of Nepal.

- **Malnutrition**

In the ecologically fragile mountain areas, environmental degradation directly affects the quantity and quality of food resources. Due to socio-cultural norms, women and children are most vulnerable to these scarcities, as they receive inadequate amounts and quality of food, perform excessive labour, and have limited access to health services. In Nepal, as many as 80% of women of childbearing age are anaemic, and studies have shown a widespread lack of sufficient protein, vitamin A, iron, and iodine (NPC/UNICEF 1996).

### Changing values

- **Monetarisisation**

In most mountain communities, traditional forms of bartering have given way to monetarisisation. As women are still involved primarily in subsistence farming activities on their families' own land, they do not earn cash for their hard work. And as roads open up avenues for selling farm products, women are usually left out of the cash transactions that men control. Previously, women had much more control over farm products, which they would barter for household necessities. But due to their limited mobility, lack of ease in dealing with male traders, and low self-esteem, they are usually excluded from today's cash transactions.

- **Influx of new values**

Even the relatively egalitarian examples of gender relations found in some traditional mountain societies following Buddhist or animist religions are being transformed by the prevailing values belonging to lowland religious, nationalistic, and cultural paradigms. Changes occurring in once remote mountain areas are affecting gender relations in ways that we have yet to fully understand, but the indications are that women's value in their households, communities, and societies is declining as money and outside worldliness are becoming the new indicators of status (Gurung, B. 1998). It is, however, not always necessary that the influx of new values leads to negative consequences for women. New values bring new aspirations; for example, parents in Bhutan are now sending their girl children to school, as they believe education can free them from being trapped at home (Tshering 1998).

### Invisibility of women

Although the data clearly show that women are the dominant farmers in the mountain areas, their significant knowledge, management, and even labour in the forests and fields

are ignored by the predominantly male-oriented research and extension staff. Because women's contribution to agricultural production is not visible and usually not considered significant by agricultural professionals, their role as managers of agrobiodiversity in the region has gone largely unnoticed. Policies designed with the best intentions in capital cities have not taken the local realities of women's lives into account.

- **Links between status of women and children**

In remote areas with scarce facilities, women are exposed to high risks associated with childbearing. Working 14-16 hours a day and without the protein, iron, and calories required, women do not obtain the expected weight gain during pregnancy, leading to improper development of the foetus and low birth weights.

Mountain areas have some of the highest infant and maternal mortality rates in the world. These rates are a direct result of poor maternal health and inadequate safe motherhood practices. A letter published in the Kathmandu Post (1998) stated that of 14 medical centres in Nepal able to handle complicated deliveries, only 2 were located in mountain regions.

## **Bright Spots**

### ***Educational Opportunities***

One of the most dramatic changes seen at the rural level is the education of girl children. Perhaps due to the campaigns of a few international agencies, girls are now increasingly being enrolled in school. This does not necessarily translate into their attendance at school, due to their responsibilities for childcare, livestock herding, and so on, but even their enrollment indicates a new investment in girl children's lives.

Another aspect of education in the mountains is non-formal education for women. These programmes provide women with basic reading, writing, and accounting skills, and also expose them to new technologies or messages about health and other topics. But the greatest impact may be in their newly found levels of self-confidence and commitment to change things for the better in collaboration with other women of their communities.

### ***Political participation***

Statistics show that the representation of women in national political bodies is extremely low in most countries of the HKH region. Although there are very few mountain women holding political positions in national assemblies, increasingly women are voting and taking up positions within local bodies, such as the village panchayats in India. With the democratisation and decentralisation of governing bodies in countries of the HKH region, women with leadership abilities will increasingly take up responsible positions.

### ***Taking the lead***

In some mountain communities, women have banded together to address problems of environmental deterioration, economic hardship, and domestic violence. Besides the well-known example of the Chipko movement in the hills of Uttar Pradesh, another form of

social organisation indigenous to the Gurung society, the Mothers' Group, has recently received attention. In the hills of Nepal, these groups have mobilised support from projects and tourists to build footpaths, establish fodder/firewood plantations, start day-care centres, set up savings schemes, and so on. Across the hills of Nepal and India, such groups are using their joint power to wage war on alcoholism and domestic violence.

## Conclusion

The situation of women in the mountains of the HKH presents a contradictory picture. Women appear to be competent, knowledgeable, independent actors upon whose shoulders the bulk of the responsibility for survival and sustainability of households and communities rests. And yet they are weighed down by distinctive structural constraints, burdened by negative ideologies, lack economic assets, and often are unable to enforce their decisions over even their own labour, bodies, and major life events.

Outsiders who work with women and men of the mountains often assume that they are subject to the same levels of gender inequity as lowland women, and thus impose their own biases on how they are to behave. This attitude is causing mountain women to lose status and value in their own communities.

Development strategies throughout the region have not yet demonstrated the understanding that gender bias is a primary cause of poverty, because it prevents women from obtaining the education, training, health services, legal status, and other abilities and opportunities to combat it. Only when gender bias is reduced and eventually eliminated can the economic and environmental problems of the HKH mountains be solved.

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