

# Mountain Farming Systems



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## Organising Mountain Women

Jeannette D. Gurung

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*MFS Series No. 95/2*

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Ms Jeannette D. Gurung is a Professional Staff Member of ICIMOD

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# Preface

This current discussion paper in the Mountain Farming Series, "Organising Mountain Women," is one of a number of papers delivered at the "Regional Conference on the Sustainable Development of Fragile Mountain Areas of Asia" which took place from December 13th to 16th 1994 in Kathmandu, Nepal. Support for this Conference came from the Swiss Development Cooperation, FAO, UNDP, UNEP, and the UNU.

The unanimous concern expressed at this conference was for the deteriorating conditions of both the environments and livelihoods of mountain people. Mountain development had not been geared to the people nor the environment it purported to serve.

One of the achievements of the Conference was a wider sharing of knowledge amongst the mountain countries of Asia and insight into the constraints that confronted them and the opportunities offered by the wide diversity of their special mountain environments. Another significant achievement was the formulation of a Call to Action on the Sustainable Development of Mountain Areas of Asia, or SUDEMAA recommendations.

By publishing the conference papers in its various discussion paper series, ICIMOD seeks to share the knowledge gained with a wider audience. This current paper should be of interest to all those who are working with or concerned about the well-being of mountain women.

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# **Background: Mountain Context**

The biophysical characteristics of mountain environments - verticality, fragility, hazard-proneness, cold temperatures and even thin air - invoke, at least to the outsider, a harsh environment, wrought with difficulties and suffering for those who inhabit such spaces. To be sure, there are many constraints inherent to life in the mountains that are not faced by lowlanders, but there are also many positive attributes which residents affix to the place they call home. Both limitations and opportunities posed by mountain biophysical characteristics will be considered here to present a context through which to understand mountain women's lives.

## **Verticality**

The most prominent feature of the mountains, verticality, means that higher levels of energy are required to transport goods, including compost manure, fuelwood, fodder, and water, up and down slopes (Bandyopadhyay 1994). In the case of the Hindu Kush-Himalayas (HKH), this work is often carried out by humans themselves, without the aid of mules or other animals. (The use of carts is, of course, made impossible by the terrain.) Since much of this work is performed by women in the mountains, they bear the physical hardship of carrying heavy loads up steep slopes.

## **Inaccessibility**

The remoteness of mountain areas and difficulties associated with travel there for persons from lowland capitals and market centres have contributed to an isolation of these areas. The high costs of transportation and, therefore, investment in the mountains and minimal communication with urban and regional centres have resulted in the exclusion of these areas from the development programmes and commercial growth that are occurring in non-mountain regions. These include the provision of government services in the health, education, and agricultural extension sectors. The result is that mountain residents must themselves go out from their homes to gain access to the knowledge and services needed for improvement in their lives. Yet, due to their isolation ("backwardness"), they often lack the confidence to take the

initiative and request the services that they are rightfully owed as national citizens. If this is the case for men in mountain communities, for women it is all the more difficult. Due to cultural traditions, women do not usually travel outside of their immediate surroundings, nor speak to strange men, and generally lack the confidence to approach officials with requests.

## **Marginality**

Mountain peoples are generally politically and economically marginalised with respect to regional and national centres of power and trade. They have all too few spokespersons who champion the cause of the highland people to represent their interests in national planning forums and decision-making bodies. Even though mountain regions have historically been exporters of natural resources to the lowlands, mountain people themselves have gained little benefit from the extraction of such resources. They are exploited under unequal terms of trade, with little consideration given to their traditional rights over the resources. This vulnerability to exploitation by outsiders (or to insiders with power) is more pronounced in the case of women, who often have no legal claim to property and are lacking in confidence due to their overall and low educational status. In addition, a lower status of women in relation to men in all societies of the HKH reflects a marginalisation of women within their own communities as well. Mountain women, therefore, along with ethnic minority groups and members of low castes, are doubly marginalised with respect to power. Their opinions, needs, and perceptions are very rarely reflected in national policies and international forums (Gurung and Banskota 1990).

And yet, mountain women generally do not fit the picture often portrayed as mere beasts of burden, subject to the whims of domineering, unsympathetic, and lazy husbands. In contrast, mountain women are generally a strong healthy lot possessing an extensive knowledge of the natural environment and practices to manage the household, farm, and community resources. They often enjoy a sexual division of labour less strict than that of lowland women and a freedom of action that allows them to interact more publicly with men (Archarya and Bennett 1983).

## **Biodiversity**

Diverse micro-environments, plants, and animals occurring naturally in the mountains are selectively exploited and protected by mountain residents as part

of their strategies for survival and long-term security. As the primary users and managers of agricultural and forest lands in all areas of the HKH mountains (e.g., Archarya and Bennett 1983, Mehta 1990, Shrestha 1988, World Bank 1990), the women there have the sophisticated knowledge to manage a multiplicity of roles and small production systems to adapt and survive in a fragile environment.

## **Cultural Diversity**

Partially as an effect of biological diversity, cultural diversity is a feature of mountain regions. Numerous ethnic groups with distinct languages and traditions abound in mountain regions. Isolation has led mountain residents to have a strong identity with a sense of place, and it has helped to preserve unique languages and cultural traditions from the onslaught of mainstream pressures to adopt 'national' cultures. Mountain communities have also, however, absorbed some outside elements brought in by those returning from outside employment or trading, or from outsiders coming to the areas as refugees, seeking sanctuaries from oppression or even poverty.

## **Collective Action**

Isolation and the need for adaptation to a harsh and fragile environment have led to collective action strategies. Far from the centres where government officers presided, mountain communities formed their own informal and formal institutions to administer social and legal 'laws' by consensus. Reciprocity is a common phenomenon in mountain communities; systems of shared labour exchange are common. These traditions gave rise to the formation of strong informal institutions (Pitt 1988).

## **Changing Circumstances**

The largely self-sufficient, independent, and isolated communities of the mountains are gradually giving way to become members of the 'global village'. Externally - driven changes are more and more affecting even remote mountain societies through market forces, government development interventions, political movements, tourism - even internationally broadcast TV. Urban centres and international markets are increasingly consuming natural resources, which



require greater extraction from mountain regions and therefore the potential to increase the exploitation of mountain people. Commercial agriculture is being introduced to supplement subsistence systems, and local economies are becoming monetised. Out-migration of males is a well-recognised phenomenon that will only increase as farming becomes less sustainable and profitable. In-migration of lowlanders unfamiliar with strategies for proper management of mountain farming and for survival is bound to cause environmental damage. Education and employment opportunities elsewhere are distancing youth from the land and setting in motion a process of 'class differentiation' (Mehta 1990).

All changes, however, have not been negative. Many mountain residents have benefitted from the accessibility to nearby schools, health care centres, and other services. Some have earned significant profits from tourism. However, the vast majority of mountain regions in the developing world have experienced an increase in absolute poverty, especially that of women and children (Byers and Sainju 1993).

In the wake of these changes, mountain people have not been able to organise themselves to manage their own resources adequately and to make their voices heard in order to orient development initiatives to their own advantage (Bajracharya et al. 1990). Their resiliency to outside forces has broken down as old traditions, local institutions, and culture are challenged by the new religion of materialism and consumerism (Mehta 1990). Traditional forms of organisation are breaking down in the face of new forms promoted by development organisations, banks, and governments.

## **The Current Mountain Scenario: What It Means for Women**

The current trends witnessed in the mountains today affect mountain residents in a number of ways. An increased pressure on natural resources, brought on by both the internal demands of a larger population and exploitation pressures from outside make it impossible for farmers to continue with the subsistence strategies that have worked in the past. Traditional agricultural practices that require long fallow periods and extensive support lands for supplies of biomass, such as fodder, will soon no longer be feasible. New marginal lands may be brought into production, but these will be distant and more fragile, requiring significant labour inputs to make them arable. The quest for cash brings new cash crops, and these place added labour demands on women's time without

necessarily bringing them a fair share in the profits. At the same time, their primary role in subsistence agriculture is losing status and value. Common property resources, which are of particular importance to women as sources of fodder and fuelwood, are becoming degraded, increasingly privatised, and rendered inaccessible through the protection schemes of community forestry programmes and national parks. As distances to agricultural and forest lands increase, and the daily business of searching for and carrying fuelwood, animal fodder, and water becomes more difficult, women's workloads are increased significantly, leaving families no choice but to detain their children from attending school to assist with the chores. Most often, it is the female children who are held back, thereby missing out on an education and perpetuating the cycle of inequity.

As change accelerates in the mountain villages, women, who are often without education and even literacy skills, are alienated from the new knowledge and activities in their villages. Their traditional skills as subsistence farmers and environmental managers are devalued as cash crops and other forms of cash-earning activities are undertaken, mostly by men. Due to cultural and mobility constraints, women are largely excluded from the world of commercialisation (Mehta 1990). Women are rarely the recipients of new information on improved systems of farming provided by extension officers (Centre for Women and Development 1988). Their roles in informal institutions controlling water and forest resources, for example, may be undermined by new forms of more formalised and centralised organisations, in which representatives of government agencies may attend meetings and insist on a hierarchial structure which effectively renders women's participation infeasible. And as male members are increasingly absent from the household, women are left to make important decisions themselves in areas where they may have not done so before (i.e., in the public sphere). Although they become *de facto* heads of households, they are still denied land ownership and access to credit and extension services, and they are left to manage the family farm under increasingly difficult conditions with fewer resources than before.

Women's workloads have increased perceptively in the face of these trends. Market-oriented agriculture has not brought about changes in the traditional sexual divisions of labour, nor is it based on new techniques or labour-saving technologies. Women are forced to absorb increased labour requirements, and this is reinforced by male migration (Mehta 1990). Fodder shortages, abetted by the introduction of new agricultural crops which produce less residue, are also affecting time spent gathering biomass resources for livestock. For most women, time is the biggest constraint to undertaking development activities.

# Mobilising Women

Recognising the key role that women play in managing the environment (and the intensification of their workload that subjects women and their families to enormous stresses), some development agencies of governments and NGOs are of the opinion that women can be strong allies in environmental programmes. This is based on the understanding that women are the first to suffer under conditions of a deteriorating resource base. However, most programmes related to women and their use of the environment are of two types: high investment projects that marginalise women and women-specific projects that are themselves marginalised from mainstream programmes (Pradhan and Rankin 1990). Strategies to assist women are usually peripheral, limited to income and employment generation. The major role of women in agriculture is not yet fully appreciated.

Improving the status of women and enhancing their capabilities and opportunities to participate fully in the development process are the objective of fewer organisations, mainly NGOs. The equity and quality of life concerns of these organisations lead them to search for the means of empowering women, increasing their self-confidence and capabilities. One effective strategy for achieving this is the formation and strengthening of women's groups.

## Organising Women

### Why Women's Groups?

Why should women as a group organise separately and what interests do they share which bind them together? Women are often divided along caste, class, religious, or ethnic lines. However, in their gender-ascriptive roles they have traditionally organised around a number of concerns related to their practical needs, although these are often not formalised. Isolation, cultural norms, and heavy workloads have made it difficult for women to organise themselves and sustain the initiative (Moser 1993).

It has been argued that collective action is required to confront the powerlessness of poor women (Wignaraja 1990); that it is the recognition of subordination, in the household and society, which provides the basis for cooperative coordination (Moser 1993). Mountain women have long understood that, by working together, they are able to accomplish and enjoy tasks that are

otherwise tedious and difficult to complete in the necessary narrow time frame (i.e., planting, harvesting). In times of stress, other women in the community can be counted on to share resources and labour as needed.

But traditional cooperative groups of women have yet to realise that the benefits of collective action can extend beyond the spheres of their households and farms to provide them with a voice to attract outside assistance to their communities. Group formation is particularly powerful in weakening the 'inside/outside dichotomy' that constricts women within the boundaries of the family household and farm (Bennett 1992). Collectively, women can approach development agencies for assistance to meet their needs, determined by themselves, through self-help projects, extension services, or credit. Such initiatives have the advantage of being built on women's perceptions and indigenous knowledge of the environment and are, therefore, culture-specific. With membership limited mostly to women, the group can assure that issues related specifically to women will not be undermined by men.

In the process of developing institutional networks, women themselves develop self-confidence and a sense of empowerment; all have the opportunity to arise as leaders - a chance which is very difficult when men are also members. Group meetings are arranged around women's work schedules and usually held informally, allowing more participation of all members. Common struggles and common constraints serve to bring a sense of solidarity to the group, which increases its enthusiasm to become involved in activities to improve their status and living conditions.

## **Examples of Successful Women's Organisations**

Over the past 10 years, it can be seen that when women organise and participate as active subjects rather than as passive objects of development programmes, they can move from a condition of mere survival to one of sustainable development (Wignaraja 1990).

### **a. *Pakistan: The Aga Khan Rural Support Programme***

Women's organisations have been formed as separate entities from the AKRSP's village organisations, through which all programme activities are implemented. The AKRSP enters into a contract with women's organisations to provide technical assistance and training for specific women's production packages (home-based poultry, vegetable production, nurseries) and labour-

saving technologies, and training in organisation and management. Women agree to meet regularly and contribute to a savings' scheme. A second interim evaluation concluded that progress in each of the three districts was remarkable, giving equal emphasis to institution building and enhanced productivity. These women's organisations have benefitted members by facilitating their access to much-needed social services and providing a conduit through which technical services can be delivered to them. They have also reduced women's isolation and built up their self-confidence in identifying their needs and requesting external agencies to supply services. For the first time, women in Gilgit have access to agricultural production credit. The existence of separate women's groups, able to articulate their needs, has made it easier for agencies to respond and for visiting female staff from such agencies to directly contact women.

The AKRSP Project staff have realised that women work more hours than men on every household and farm production activity, making a compelling case for all interventions in village or women's organisations to have a specific gender focus. It is their belief that improvements in agricultural and natural resource conservation will be achieved only if both the quality of female labour and women's access to productive resources are improved (World Bank 1990).

*b. Bangladesh: Grameen Bank and the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC)*

Grameen Bank's objective of extending credit to the poorest and creating opportunities for their self-employment led to their interest in building women's groups through raising awareness, providing training in organisational procedures, and developing cooperative groups for health care, child nutrition, literacy, and family planning. Loans are provided to poor women, who have been considered the greatest credit risk. This bank, which started as a small village credit society for the poor, has developed into an exemplary alternative banking system able to overcome constraints to reach poor women. Much of its success can be credited to the attitudes and behaviour of its staff who undergo training in action research methods and ways of listening and learning.

BRAC is an NGO which aims to help the poorest men and women without assets. They place a strong emphasis on awareness creation and empowerment, responding to the social as well as to the economic priorities of the poor. They facilitate the creation of women's groups through functional

literacy programmes, which develop social consciousness and then provide credit for group schemes. Small personal savings are encouraged, then followed by small income-generating activities. Institution building and human development, including leadership training, are major programme areas (Wignaraja 1990).

c. *Nepal: Production Credit for Rural Women (PCRW)*

The Production Credit for Rural Women Project is an initiative of a government ministry which has been able to be flexible enough to address a wide variety of issues, such as health, education, credit, and income-generating activities, in response to the needs of the poor. Planners of PCRW recognised that the simple delivery of services and technical assistance in a fragmented manner were insufficient to improve conditions for women - extension approaches had to be reoriented to women's realities. Through women's groups, this programme addresses economic and social needs simultaneously, recognising the interrelatedness of the two for rural women. Women Development Officers are trained as catalysts to mobilise groups and help them to articulate their needs - first within the group, then to government agencies (with the WDO's help) to receive technical support (Baer 1988).

d. *India: Chipko Andolan, the Working Women's Forum, and the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA)*

1. Chipko Andolan: In 1972, villagers from Chamoli (including women) in the U.P. hills challenged contractors, who were felling trees for commercial interests, through non-violent collective action. Women came later to be at the forefront of the campaign for reforestation and forest protection; they were successful in blocking the cutting of a large oak tract for establishment of a potato seed farm and other infrastructure, which were desired by the village men for income generation. Women coined the slogan, "Planning without fodder, fuel, and water is one-eyed planning." This group of women started a successful campaign to rid the villages of male alcoholism (Agarwal 1988).

2. The Working Women's Forum (WWF): Initiated as a response to urban poverty, the WWF was set up to free poor women from the circle of indebtedness and exploitation by forming their own solidarity groups to manage savings and offer credit. The WWF encourages the creative potential of poor women by mobilising them, raising their awareness, and organising them through participatory processes into cooperatives completely managed by themselves who are its shareholders and directors. The training of group



organisers, technical training, and non-formal adult education are key to the programme's success.

3. The Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA): Based on Gandhian principles, SEWA began as a trade union to deal with the total problems of poor women working in the informal sector. SEWA provides poor women with a support system not only in their workplace, but also in their homes in relation to the totality of their lives. Twenty-one thousand members (in 1990) are organised into small groups, according to their livelihoods as vendors, home-based producers, and labourers, which elect their own leaders. In addition to its work in advocacy for women's rights, SEWA manages its own bank and credit society (Wignaraja 1990).

## **Features of Successful Initiatives**

Several features of the successful initiatives described above can be identified to provide guidelines for building and supporting programmes to develop women's groups and organisations. These are as follows:

1. the government has provided a policy framework, support system, and 'political space' for experimentation, allowing alternative mechanisms to traditional credit and services' institutions; and
2. intermediate organisations act as catalysts to mobilise, raise the awareness of, and organise women by:
  - \* sensitising them about organisational matters,
  - \* organising homogeneous groups to meet common needs,
  - \* mobilising savings to support activities, build assets, and serve as collateral,
  - \* introducing new knowledge and activities,
  - \* developing strategies for sustainable use of natural resources,
  - \* integrating survival needs with social needs, and
  - \* ensuring that the poor are beneficiaries.

The process should be culture-specific, drawing on women's indigenous knowledge and participation as critical components. At the national level, the government must reorient its delivery system to respond to women's needs. Intermediate institutions will be needed to coordinate a dialogue between the women's organisations, NGOs, and government agencies (Wignaraja 1990).

## Conclusions

*"All effective projects have emerged from and as a result of the organisation of women for collective action, which is required to confront powerlessness. This is a prerequisite for effective sustainable development"* (Wignaraja 1990).

The objective of any development programme is to improve the quality of life, and this is based on two elements: condition and position. The conditions of women's lives can be changed in a relatively short time span, since they are practical in nature and are concerned with inadequacies in living conditions such as water, health care, education, and so on. They do not challenge the gender divisions of labour or women's subordinate position in society. Change in women's position, however, is a greater challenge, based on issues of power and control over resources. Meeting strategic gender needs helps women to achieve greater equality, alters existing roles, and thereby improves women's economic and social standing in relation to others.

Mountain women themselves identify their practical needs related to their primary roles in family care, farm production, and community management. Planners, who are interested in addressing these same needs, find a unity of purpose with these priorities and claim to have a 'Women in Development' programme. However, the more profound needs for equality cannot be met solely through the design and implementation of women's programmes along these lines. The capacity to confront the nature of gender inequality and women's subordination can only be fulfilled when the bottom-up struggle of women's organisations has been incorporated (Moser 1993). Only when both the practical and strategic needs of mountain women are addressed can governments and development agencies claim that they are meeting the challenge of achieving sustainable development in mountain communities.



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## **ICIMOD**

ICIMOD is the first international centre in the field of mountain development. Founded out of widespread recognition of environmental degradation of mountain habitats and the increasing poverty of mountain communities, ICIMOD is concerned with the search for more effective development responses to promote the sustained well being of mountain people.

The Centre was established in 1983 and commenced professional activities in 1984. Though international in its concerns, ICIMOD focusses on the specific, complex, and practical problems of the Hindu Kush-Himalayan Region which covers all or part of eight Sovereign States.

ICIMOD serves as a multidisciplinary documentation centre on integrated mountain development; a focal point for the mobilisation, conduct, and coordination of applied and problem-solving research activities; a focal point for training on integrated mountain development, with special emphasis on the assessment of training needs and the development of relevant training materials based directly on field case studies; and a consultative centre providing expert services on mountain development and resource management.

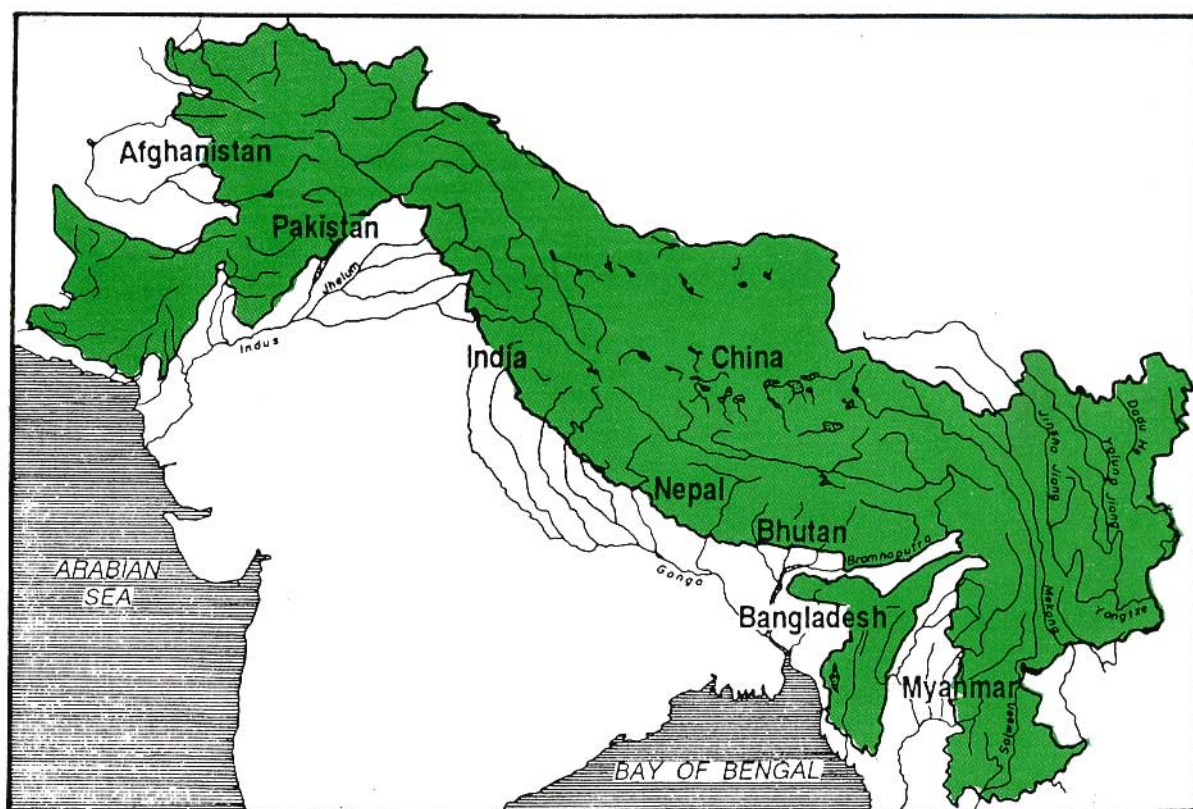
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Mountain Farming Systems constitutes one of the thematic research and development programmes at ICIMOD. The main goals of the programme include i) Technologies and Management Practices - Soil Fertility and Water Management; Integrating Indigenous Knowledge; ii) Strengthening Mountain Agriculture; iii) Integration of Gender Concerns in the Development of Sustainable Mountain Agriculture; iv) Agricultural Research Networking; and v) Agricultural Extension and Training.

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**INTERNATIONAL CENTRE FOR INTEGRATED MOUNTAIN DEVELOPMENT**  
4/80 Jawalakhel, G.P.O Box 3226, Kathmandu, Nepal

Telex : 2439 ICIMOD, NP  
Telephone : (977-1) 525313

Cable : ICIMOD, NEPAL  
Fax : (977-1) 524509  
(977-1) 524317