

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).