

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.