

# Mainstreaming Gender in Mountain Development – From Policy to Practice

Lessons learned from a gender assessment of four projects implemented in the Hindu Kush-Himalayas



Enabling poor rural people to overcome poverty









# Mainstreaming Gender in Mountain Development: From Policy to Practice

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Brigitte Leduc, ICIMOD\*

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## Introduction

Mountain communities meet the numerous challenges inherent in living in a mountain environment with an array of livelihood strategies that take advantage of the scarce resources and niche opportunities that the environment presents. As in many mountain areas, the Hindu Kush-Himalayan region (HKH) is home to a variety of ethnic groups, but despite their diverse cultures and social structures, these communities face similar issues. Remoteness, the absence of basic infrastructure, and the inaccessibility of public services in many locations compel mountain people to rely on their own resources for survival.

Although surviving in an inhospitable environment requires strong collaboration between the members of a community, little attention has been paid historically to the role of women in mountain livelihoods. Mountain women's knowledge and skills have always contributed to the health and wellbeing of the members of their household. However, the additional hardship of their workload, triggered by the nature of the landscape, the scarcity of fundamental resources such as water and forests, and their relative isolation, is still rarely addressed in development plans.

Although both women and men are affected by the challenges of the mountain environment, gender inequality adds to the burden of women. Women are less educated (see for example Tables 1 and 2), have more health problems, are more exposed to the effects of poverty, face more discrimination, and are more vulnerable to violence. Compounding this, women have very limited access to technology, financial resources, land rights, training, information, and mobility; their contribution to the wellbeing of their households and communities is seldom acknowledged; they are rarely represented on decision-making bodies; and their needs are seldom addressed by development plans (see Box overleaf).

Table 1: Literacy rates in rural Uttarakhand and Meghalaya in India in 2001

	Men	Women
Rural Uttarakhand	45%	33%
Rural Meghalaya	50%	39%

Source: GB Pant Institute of Himalayan Environment and Development (2001)

Table 2: Literacy rates in the mountains and hills of the Mid Western and Far Western Development Regions of Nepal in 2001

	Men	Women
Mid Western mountains	41%	8%
Mid Western hills	55%	24%
Far Western mountains	55%	12%
Far Western hills	60%	16%

Source: UNDP (2004)

\* Present address: Secretariat of the Pacific Community, Noumea, New Caledonia

## The Four IFAD Projects Investigated in the Gender Assessments

### Western Uplands Poverty Alleviation Project (WUPAP) – Nepal

The WUPAP project began in 2003 and has been implemented in 11 districts in the Mid Western and Far Western Development Regions of Nepal. The goal is to strengthen the livelihood systems of the rural poor in the project districts. The project has five main components: 1) development of rural infrastructure; 2) leasehold forestry and production of non-timber forest products (NTFPs) and medicinal and aromatic plants (MAPs); 3) development of smallholder agriculture; 4) microfinance and marketing; and 5) institutional development (policy change, organisational change). The gender assessment was conducted by Basundhara Bhattarai in the districts of Humla, Jumla, and Bajhang.

### Uttarakhand Livelihoods Improvement Project in the Himalayas (ULIPH) – India

The ULIPH project began in 2004 and covers five districts in the state of Uttarakhand. The overall objective is to reduce poverty. The project has three main components: 1) supporting the establishment of self help groups; 2) drudgery reduction interventions; and 3) convergence activities. The gender assessment was carried out by Manjari Mehta in the districts of Uttarkashi and Almora.

### North Eastern Region Community Resource Management Project for Upland Areas (NERCORMP) – India

The NERCORMP project was implemented from May 1999 to March 2008 in six districts in North East India with the goal of improving the livelihoods of vulnerable groups in a sustainable manner through improved management of their natural resource base and restoration and protection of the environment. The project had six components: 1) increase family incomes from farm and non-farm sources; 2) create and foster environmental awareness and knowledge; 3) establish effective systems for input delivery and asset maintenance; 4) increase the participation of women in local institutions and community decision making; 5) enhance savings capacity and promote thrift; and 6) provide access to basic services and social infrastructure. The gender assessment was carried out by Madhu Sarin in the districts of Garo Hills, Karbi Anglong, and Senapati.

### Meghalaya Livelihoods Improvement Project for the Himalayas (MLIPH) – India

The MLIPH project began in 2004 and covers five districts in the state of Meghalaya in North East India. The goal is to improve the livelihoods of 29,300 vulnerable households in an equitable and sustainable manner through the promotion of improved livelihood opportunities and the strengthening of local institutions that relate to livelihood development. The project has four main components: 1) enhance the capability of local people to select appropriate livelihood opportunities, access required financial and other resources, and manage new technologies and institutions at the village level; 2) increase incomes through more sustainable farm and non-farm income generating activities; 3) establish effective and appropriate delivery systems for technical, technological, and financial business development services and inputs and for the maintenance of assets and resources; and 4) enhance the delivery of government services and the capability of eligible local people to access them. The gender assessment was carried out by Madhu Sarin in the districts of Jaintia Hills and East Garo Hills.

Failing to acknowledge women's role in mountain livelihoods is not only detrimental to women, it limits the capacity of society to build on and take advantage of a significant pool of knowledge and skills that could support mountain people's resilience in the face of socioeconomic and environmental change.

Several international conventions and frameworks have stressed the need to mainstream gender in development and natural resource management. Gender equality and women's empowerment are one of the Millennium Development Goals, and considered a precondition for achieving other development goals. In the mountains, this takes on an even more significant dimension in terms of achieving food security and supporting adaptation to socioeconomic and environmental change in the context of increasing male outmigration, which has resulted in an increase in the feminisation of mountain livelihoods.

Principles of gender equality and women's empowerment have shaped the strategies of many development stakeholders working in the South Asian region. How can these values be translated into development programmes implemented in the mountains?

The purpose of this paper is to explore the key elements required in a gender mainstreaming strategy for sustainable mountain development. The paper presents the findings of a gender assessment conducted in 2008 of four projects supported by the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) and implemented in the mountains of the HKH (see box for details).

The Western Uplands Poverty Alleviation Project (WUPAP) in Nepal and the Uttarakhand Livelihoods Improvement Project in the Himalayas (ULIPH) in India are implemented within very similar socio-cultural structures based on the caste system. The North Eastern Region Community Resource Management Project for Upland Areas (NERCORMP) and Meghalaya Livelihoods Improvement Project for the Himalayas (MLIPH) are both implemented in North East India where the population is mainly indigenous (referred to in India as 'scheduled tribes'). Some groups in this area are still organised according to a matrilineal system where women are the custodians of the land. Despite these differences, mountain women face similar issues: gender discrimination, poverty, and exclusion. The projects assessed have all adopted strategies to empower women, reduce their drudgery, break their isolation, and develop their social capital.

The first section of this paper introduces the methodological framework for the gender assessment; the second examines how the four projects have addressed gender issues; and the final two sections present lessons learned and a list of recommendations on how to mainstream gender in development projects and programmes in the context of the Hindu Kush-Himalayan region. Summaries of the individual assessment reports are included in the Annexes, together with a copy of the guidelines that were developed for mainstreaming gender in the Western Uplands Poverty Alleviation Project (Annex 1B).



### Gender inequality in Nepal

In 2001, only 0.8% of women in Nepal owned a house, 5.3% owned land, and 5.4% owned livestock (Dabadi 2009).

Between 1997 and 2002, women's representation in local government institutions in Nepal was 6.7% in the district development committees, 7.7% in the village development committees, and 2.1% in village councils (UNDP 2004).

## The Gender Assessment Methodology

### IFAD's gender framework

IFAD's approach to gender mainstreaming is clearly explained in its Gender Mainstreaming Action Plan 2003–2006. Based on the recognition of the roles of both men and women in the agricultural economy and in rural development, IFAD is committed to promoting gender equality and empowering women, which are considered both as objectives and as instruments for poverty reduction (IFAD 2003, p. 1). Projects supported by IFAD are required to mainstream the gender perspective into all their operations. The three pillars of IFAD's gender mainstreaming approach are

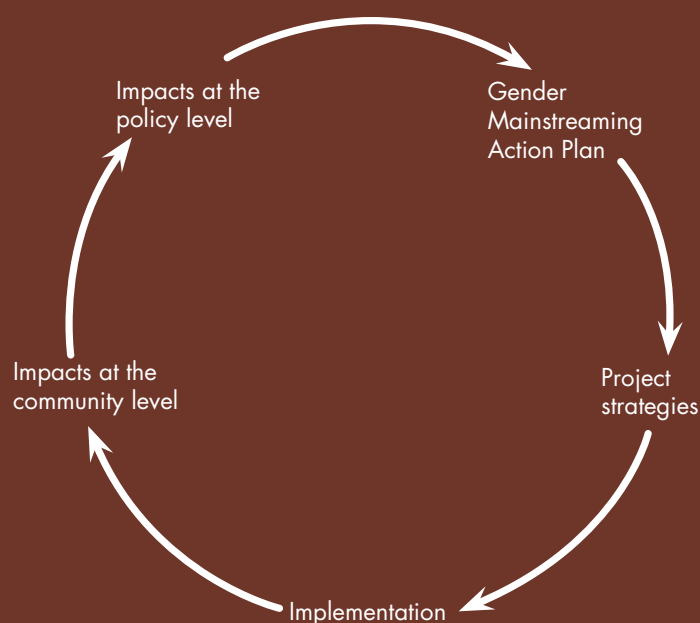
- to improve the wellbeing of women and ease their workload;
- to strengthen women's agency; and
- to expand women's access to and control over fundamental assets.

### The assessments

The gender assessments were conducted in 2008 by a team of consultants using a common methodological framework proposed by ICIMOD. They aimed to assess the extent to which IFAD's gender mainstreaming strategy impacted on the projects implemented in the mountain regions of the HKH, and how the strategy improved the capacity of the projects to reach women and men, empower women, and ensure that men and women benefit equally from IFAD development initiatives.

The consultants analysed the project documents, conducted interviews with project team members and some key partners, and carried out a series of meetings and group discussions with women and men from the communities where the projects were implemented. Specifically, the gender assessments looked at the following:

- How IFAD's strategy to promote gender equality is reflected concretely in development interventions
- The effects of IFAD's gender mainstreaming strategy on stakeholders
- How IFAD's gender mainstreaming approach has influenced its partners to integrate a gender perspective in their approach and to address gender issues
- The challenges and entry points in promoting gender equity in the HKH region



### Gender mainstreaming

Gender mainstreaming refers to the institutionalisation of a gender perspective in development initiatives (policies, programmes, and projects), development approaches and strategies, and organisational culture. It does not mean adding specific activities to address women's practical needs; rather it consists of taking into account gender roles, and men's and women's differential needs and capabilities.

When gender is mainstreamed in a development project, it affects the quality of participation of women and men in project activities; the level of access and control over project resources by both women and men; the level of benefit received by women and men; and how well women's and men's practical and strategic needs are addressed; and contributes to empowering women and changing gender relations.

## Addressing Gender Issues in the Mountains: Findings of the Gender Assessments

Mainstreaming gender in a project cycle starts from the design of the project. The socioeconomic analysis must include a gender analysis. The identification of development issues and potential solutions should take into account the gender dimension, i.e., how the issues affect women and men differently, and the different needs of the two groups. The project design has to reflect the gender analysis and propose interventions that will address both women's and men's needs. But this is not enough; a gender sensitive project should also contribute to reducing gender inequality by ensuring equitable access to development resources for both women and men; promoting the meaningful participation of women in decision-making processes; and supporting women's empowerment.

### Improve wellbeing and ease workloads

This component is particularly important for mountain women whose daily burden to fulfil the basic needs of their households is exceptionally high as a result of remoteness, steep terrain, and the absence of basic infrastructure. For example, in WUPAP's working area in Nepal, many women spend 4 to 12 hours every 3 days collecting and carrying one head load of fuelwood or grass from nearby forests.

In all of the projects assessed, particular efforts were made to address women's needs by reducing their drudgery. This was also seen as a strategic approach to eventually encourage women to participate in capacity building activities and to join self help or women's groups.

The installation of small infrastructure and equipment such as piped water equipment, water reservoirs, latrines, smokeless stoves, mills, pre-primary schools, and roads have contributed to significantly reducing women's drudgery in the mountains and are well appreciated by women. These types of interventions not only reduce the workload of women, they also improve their health and increase the opportunities for girls to access education.

ULIPH acknowledged the significant role that women play in farm production and in promoting simple technologies and methods to reduce their drudgery by making lighter tools accessible, developing cattle troughs, training bullocks for cartage, and promoting vermi-composting.

Home gardens are another interesting initiative promoted in North East India by NERCORMP. Home gardens contribute to reducing women's drudgery related to food collection from shifting cultivation by making food resources available close to home.

With the feminisation of agriculture in several regions of the Himalayas, it is important to develop more interventions to address farmers' needs that acknowledge women as farmers. This will be particularly significant in improving food security and helping mountain people to adapt to environmental and climatic changes.

However, projects have a limited capacity to fulfil all the needs at this level – particularly in the mountains, where remoteness makes infrastructure for drudgery reduction costly. The success of such interventions has resulted in an increased demand from other communities. However, the assessment also showed a lack of ownership by communities, which did not take over the maintenance of infrastructure. This shows the importance of an approach that empowers communities, and particularly

### Project interventions to reduce women's drudgery

- **In Nepal**
  - Construction of water mills
  - Construction of pre-primary schools
  - Installation of water pipe equipment
  - Leasehold forestry
- **In Uttarakhand, India**
  - Improved tools (lighter)
  - Plastic water pitchers
  - Cattle troughs
  - Training of bullocks for cartage
  - Vermi-composting
  - Use of fast-growing grasses
  - Smokeless stoves
- **In North East India**
  - Construction of rice mills
  - Installation of water reservoirs
  - Construction of low cost latrines
  - Construction of roads and footpaths
  - Home gardens

women, to be organised and to put their demands to the local government bodies responsible for addressing citizens' needs. It also demonstrates the importance of creating conditions for increasing women's control over assets, notably to ensure the sustainability of project interventions.

It is important to consider to what extent women's workload has been reduced in total. If project interventions save a few hours of women's time on a regular basis, the question is what are women doing with this so-called 'free time'? Does the time saved benefit the women, or are they redirected towards more intensive work? The establishment of self help groups and the involvement of women in project activities or income generating activities require a considerable investment of time for women. The women interviewed did not seem to have more free time than before; they reported being busy with new activities (including participation in self-help groups, see below). The concern is to make sure that they receive substantial benefit from these new activities.

### Strengthen women's agency

Women's empowerment is increasingly being recognised as a prerequisite for achieving sustainable development. However, there is no unique recipe for empowering people; empowerment must be contextualised in the socio-cultural and political environment of women. It generally requires a combination of measures to build people's capacities, institutionalise changes, and create an environment that favours equal opportunities.

The projects assessed applied a combination of interventions to build the agency of women including capacity building, increasing access to information, the creation of institutions that favour women's participation in decision making, and increasing access to financial resources. At all project sites, women had previously had very limited participation in community institutions. A common strategy of the projects was to support the collective empowerment of women.

In Nepal, WUPAP promotes women's membership in community organisations supported by the project and in leasehold forestry user groups; it also encourages the creation of women-only organisations. The project builds women's leadership, and networking among village women. It partners with women's organisations to further build the capacity of women. As a result, women in the project areas are much more visible in public institutions and have increased their capacity to be heard and to influence the decisions affecting their community life. In 2008, women represented 39% of the chairpersons and 37% of the managers of community organisations in the areas covered by the assessment, as well as occupying positions such as vice chairperson and treasurer in leasehold forestry user groups.

In both Uttarakhand and North East India, the projects supported the creation of women's self help groups with the objective of developing women's access to financial resources and economic power, and creating a space where women can get together and plan and implement activities to address their needs. This approach was very fruitful and the women interviewed shared with enthusiasm how much they had personally and collectively gained from the self help groups, although they admitted that it constitutes an increase in their workload. More than the economic benefits, they appreciated the sense of togetherness, solidarity, and security that the self help groups provide. The self help groups are also used by the projects as a platform to build women's capacity, share information, and plan interventions to address their needs. In addition, the projects have supported federation of the self help groups, which has further strengthened the role of these groups in taking up collective activities such as the creation and management of collective enterprises and marketing activities. In North

### Project strategies for strengthening women's agency

- Develop women's leadership to make their voices heard and to increase their influence over community decisions to address their needs.
- Create community institutions that favour the equitable participation of women and men and ensure women's participation in decision making
- In India, support the creation of women's self help groups to increase women's access to financial resources and develop women's sense of security and solidarity
- In Nepal, favour the membership of women in leasehold forestry user groups to increase women's control over natural resources.
- Network with women's organisations to further strengthen women's groups.
- Raise awareness about gender inequality and women's rights, which can also lead to initiatives to reduce alcoholism and violence against women.



East India, a self help group federation has even set up a women's bank, while others have bought a bus and developed transportation services.

In Uttarakhand, the self help groups were found to be moving beyond their immediate mandate of savings and credit activities. In Uttarkashi, they have organised themselves to challenge local bootleggers. Some took an active role in prohibiting the open cutting of local forests and in cleaning the villages, including fining villagers for transgressions. Women are now more visible in local and regional level systems of governance in Uttarakhand. They participate in panchayat meetings, articulate their demands, and are confident enough to engage with district-level officials.

In North East India, in addition to self help groups, NERCORMP has developed an interesting mechanism to increase women's participation in the local governance system through the creation of natural resource management groups (NARMGs). Women are excluded from traditional community groups where a few older men of the community make the decisions, but the NARMGs are a community institution in which all households can participate. In the NARMGs, each household is represented by both a man and a woman. Since the NARMGs represent the local body for formulating community development plans, women are now much more involved in the decision-making process.

Raising awareness about gender inequality and women's rights was another strategy adopted by the projects to build women's agency. At the project sites, the communities have started questioning traditional practices that are harmful to women and that result in gender inequality. There is also an increasing recognition of women's contribution to the wellbeing of the community. Women are becoming more confident and more articulate in expressing their needs. There is an increasing number of networks and pressure groups working to reduce alcoholism and violence against women.

There is better recognition by men of women's contribution to the wellbeing of their household and a greater acceptance of their 'non-availability' because of their involvement in community and economic activities. At the project sites in India, men have started to share some household chores when women are out for meetings, capacity building activities, or income generating activities. However, it is difficult to assess to what extent internal household dynamics are really changing. Gender issues still seem to be associated only with women's issues.

There are benefits to empowering women, breaking their isolation, and enabling them to get together. Savings and credit schemes offer an excuse for women to get together and meet. In these groups, women are doing what men often do in their leisure time: discussing issues, sharing information, getting support, and enjoying being with each other.

However, empowering women is a long process and efforts to support this process need to be strengthened. Although women supported by the projects in India have clearly increased their access to financial resources through the creation of micro enterprises, it is unclear to what extent they have access to and control over the new income from the commercial crops and plantations which they are involved in producing. The land use changes promoted by the projects in North East India have contributed to increasing access to financial resources for households. However, they have also increased women's

workloads considerably, which has not been addressed by the projects. It was not clear if project staff were even aware of the additional burden these changes have placed on women.

### **Project strategies to expand women's access to and control over fundamental assets**

- Support the creation of income generating activities.
- In India and Nepal, increase access to financial resources through self help groups.
- In Nepal, increase access to natural resources through leasehold forestry.
- In North East India, increase participation in decision making through the NARMGs.
- Increase access to diversified resources from government programmes and NGOs through the convergence approach.

### **Expand women's access to and control over fundamental assets**

Developing women's assets base and expanding their access to and control over resources is usually at the heart of any gender strategy in development, but it is not that simple. It is generally more accepted to address women's needs through additional resources than to share existing resources. For example, it was easier to create new community institutions (NARMGs) with a mechanism to ensure women's participation, than to convince traditional institutions to involve women.

All of the projects assessed had worked to expand women's access to and control over fundamental assets by increasing their access to financial resources through self help groups. Being a member of a self help group gives women a sense of security because they know that they can access cash if there is an emergency. This has reduced household dependency on moneylenders, who charge high interest rates. In India, the success and reliability of self help groups have increased women's access to banks and private credit, hence increasing their capacity to invest in activities that are financially and socially profitable. In the Garo Hills in North East India, a federation of self help groups invested in the establishment of a private school they themselves managed, ensuring a better education for their children. They also created a women's bank and a tea factory.

In Nepal, however, community organisations for savings and credit activities are reluctant to invest in the development of enterprises. Remoteness and lack of access to markets inhibit women's willingness to risk investing in such activities; the money, borrowed mainly by men, is used to meet immediate needs such as buying food and medicines or paying the cost of travelling to India for work.

In Nepal, WUPAP is working to increase women's access to and control over natural resources by ensuring the membership of women in leasehold forestry user groups. The objective of the project is to increase women's access to forest products and the supply of grass to reduce their drudgery. However, by law, only degraded forestland is eligible for lease. It takes many years to reap benefits from this type of land. At the time of the assessment, leased forestlands were still not providing fuelwood and fodder and women were still spending a considerable amount of time collecting these products. Moreover, acute poverty, food insecurity, and the absence of livelihood options are compelling men to trade timber, contributing to even more deforestation. Besides supporting the creation of leasehold forest user groups, the project could support their investment in reforestation. The project should also promote access to energy efficient technology to reduce the dependence on forests.

Aware of the difficulty of promoting investment in micro enterprises in mountain areas, ULIPH and MLIPH have put in place structures to support micro entrepreneurs. Their mandate is to identify potentially viable sub sectors in which self help groups can invest, connect the self help groups with financial institutions, and develop women's marketable skills. The results are encouraging. But it is important to keep in mind that the risks involved in investing in income generating activities for mountain people, and particularly for women, are real, and vulnerable populations have little capacity to bear risk.

The convergence approach is another very interesting innovation by the projects in India. This approach contributes to addressing women's needs and expanding their access to resources by supporting linkages – or convergence – between government departments, district administrations, line departments (social welfare, agriculture, education, health, forestry, horticulture, and so forth), charitable trusts, and non-government and community organisations such as NARMGs for the implementation of community development plans. This approach is particularly important in addressing the multidimensional needs of mountain women – which cannot be fulfilled by the project alone – as women are seldom aware of government services and the economic and social resources available. The approach also helps the government to reach mountain women and improves their service delivery.

## Lessons Learned

Despite the diversity of socio-cultural contexts (even within the same sites) and physical environments, mountain women are facing similar issues; the productive and reproductive work they have to perform in remote areas without basic infrastructure constitutes a heavy burden. Their needs are rarely addressed because they are traditionally excluded from formal decision-making bodies in their community. They also rarely access the education, information, technology, or financial resources, which would enhance their capacity to seize new opportunities and improve their conditions and the wellbeing of their families.

The approach promoted by IFAD to address gender issues and support women's empowerment is based on three pillars: reducing women's drudgery, strengthening women's agency, and expanding their access to and control over fundamental assets.

## Some challenges

Working in the mountains is already a great challenge. Remoteness, long distances from one village to another, lack of basic infrastructure, steep slopes, and even altitude considerably increase the difficulties in reaching and mobilising mountain

communities, transporting equipment to project sites, delivering services, developing market access and linkages with different organisations, and monitoring interventions. Addressing social issues requires regular meetings with communities, which necessitates a thorough understanding of the local context and the capacity to communicate in the same language. In this context, working to bring about change and transform gender inequality requires a tremendous effort.

The extent to which gender was mainstreamed by the projects is questionable. The 'women focused' approach works in addressing some of the practical needs of mountain women, but it would be premature to state that it has successfully transformed unequal gender relations. Moreover, some very sensitive issues were left aside by the projects, such as women's rights over land, a fundamental asset for farmers.

Much more needs to be done in terms of addressing longer-term issues and transforming the causes of gender inequality. This will require developing more sustained capacity in project staff and partners to identify gender inequalities and address their causes. Particular efforts are needed to mainstream gender in the projects, starting with the project teams themselves. It is important for an organisation to reflect within itself the values it promotes, notably by having a gender-balanced team, listening to women's concerns, and accommodating the particular needs of women staff. This must be done to increase women's participation in the organisation, and, moreover, to increase the project's efficiency, competence, and capacity to achieve results. However, the overall situation in the project teams was as follows:

- Most of the project staff were not aware of, or had never read, IFAD's Gender Mainstreaming Action Plan 2003–2006 or the project's gender mainstreaming strategy.
- In all projects, there were very few women among the project staff and even fewer among the senior and management staff.
- Gender issues in the workplace were not addressed.
- There was a lack of engagement and accountability on the part of project managers and most of the project team members and partners, who tended to relegate the responsibility for looking at the gender perspective and working with women to the gender coordinator.

There is a weak understanding of the implications of gender mainstreaming, from conceptualisation to practice. The tendency is to have women-focused activities, but not necessarily to take the gender perspective into account in all project components. Some effort was made with regard to women's role in agriculture. However, the land use changes promoting cash crops such as areca nut, cashew nut, and offseason vegetables target men as producers, although women participate significantly in the production process. Moreover, the projects did not seem to give importance to women's preferences in continuing the production of food crops and cultivation of wild edibles, especially if there was no income value related to such production.

The capacity of project staff to conduct gender analyses and identify emerging gender issues (related to migration, climate change, land use transformation, market changes, and so forth) was very limited. For example, there is concern over the promotion of settled agricultural practices such as cash crop plantations in shifting cultivation fallows and the resultant 'privatisation' of such land. First, the project teams seemed to be unaware that promotion of sedentary activities such as cash crops can adversely impact equitable access to productive resources such as land and permanently change the traditional tenurial regimes that ensure equitable access to land for all village members. Second, the project teams did not have information about the provisions for registration of such land with the authorities (revenue and/or district councils), and, hence, were ignorant as to whether the land was registered in the name of the head of the household (usually a male), jointly in the name of the husband and wife, or, in the case of matrilineal communities, in the name of the women – or of the implications for women. Are women losing their customary rights over the land? What will be the impacts on access to land for the poor? It is important not just to look at the recurrent or traditional gender issues, but also to examine how socioeconomic changes are affecting gender roles and power relations.

Finally, it is not clear to what extent gender mainstreaming as a successful approach for addressing mountain development has been integrated into policy dialogue. How willing are government organisations to replicate the experience and mainstream gender in their programmes? Will the learning from the projects affect the priorities of the government at the local and state levels? Will it influence how they are planning and implementing their programmes? Are energy efficient technologies more accessible and is small infrastructure better developed in the mountains to address women's needs? Are mechanisms being established to ensure women's participation in decision making at the local level? Are governments more



committed to implementing a more equitable distribution of resources? Are line departments acknowledging women's role in agriculture and food security, and do they provide extension services appropriate to address the needs and increase the capacities of women?

### Successful interventions

Notwithstanding the above limitations, there were many examples of successes. The strategies implemented by the four projects to address women's needs and empower mountain women are encouraging and have contributed to changing the lives of women and men in the project areas in the following ways:

- Drudgery reduction interventions are effectively decreasing many of the more time-consuming aspects of women's daily work routines. In addition to reducing drudgery in relation to household chores, ULIPH has also contributed to reducing the labour of women related to agriculture.
- Self help groups have been successful in increasing access to financial resources for women to meet pressing household needs. They also provide a platform for women to work together for the betterment of their community, to develop self reliance, and for the empowerment of women.
- Although the creation of women-only groups is important for empowering women, it is also crucial to develop mechanisms to ensure that women are participating together with men in local institutions. The NARMGs established in the North East of India by NERCORMP are a remarkable example of how women's participation in community organisations increases the visibility of their contribution to community wellbeing, increases their power to influence the decisions that will affect their lives, and ensures that their needs are met through community development plans.
- Convergences with government and non-government organisations provide innovative ways of pooling resources for addressing community needs and favour greater access to economic and social resources for women.
- There is evidence that changes in attitudes and behaviours are occurring as a result of the interventions of these four projects. Women's contribution to the wellbeing of their families and the development of their communities is increasingly

being acknowledged and valued. Their participation in decision making is accepted and to some extent sought after.

Transforming gender inequality embedded in socio-cultural and economic institutions requires a long-term strategy. However, the experience of these four projects shows that it is possible to bring about some significant changes by addressing specific problems with the proper resources. The strategic approach adopted by the projects to address women's practical needs by addressing their strategic needs in parallel is having a broad impact (drudgery reduction + women's agency = expanded access and control over resources).

Women's empowerment has proven to be not just beneficial for women, but beneficial to their households and communities. The women involved in these projects are now increasing access to financial resources in their communities through banking activities; breaking their isolation and facilitating access to markets by developing transportation services; contributing to the promotion of education by establishing schools; and stimulating the economic and social development of their communities.



## Mainstreaming Gender in Mountain Development in the Himalayan Context

Reducing gender inequality in the mountains of the Himalayas requires a strategic approach combining interventions aimed at reducing women's drudgery, empowering women, and building their assets. The strengths and limitations identified through the gender assessments, and experience with gender mainstreaming in general, led to the following summary of recommendations to ensure successful mainstreaming of gender in programmes and projects in the Himalayan context through activities at the design and implementation stages, as well as team selection and development.

### Project design

#### 1. Understand mountain specificities

The first step in mainstreaming gender in the Himalayan environment is to develop a good understanding of the specificities of the mountain context. Strategies implemented in the plains are not always successful in the mountains. It is important to take into account the mountain environment and its constraints, such as remoteness, limited access to economic resources and markets, and limited infrastructure. Furthermore, the mountain context is not static; there are several socioeconomic and environmental changes affecting mountain communities such as the intensification of labour migration, increasing access to education, urbanisation and connectivity, and environmental changes. These changes affect and are affected by gender roles and relationships.

#### 2. Conduct gender analysis

Gender analysis of the existing situation provides information on how mountain issues are differently affecting women and men; how gender inequality is affecting the capacity of women and men to adapt to change and seize opportunities; and how gender inequality can put women and men at higher risk. Gender analysis provides the information necessary to understand what role women and men play in a particular sector, what knowledge and skills they each have related to the sector, and what constraints they face. Understanding gender issues helps to determine the interventions and implementation strategies needed to address these issues and support the programme to reach its development goal.

#### 3. Acknowledge women's role in mountain livelihoods and food security

Both women and men play a role in mountain livelihoods; however, women's significant role in mountain agriculture and food security is often overlooked by policymakers and the different agencies working in the mountains. In the Himalayan region, women manage seeds, and their knowledge and experience can be crucial in adapting to climate and other environmental changes. Moreover, in some regions, a growing number of men are migrating for work and mountain livelihoods are becoming increasingly feminised.

Although the feminisation of agriculture has been acknowledged, the concept itself tends to hide the fact that women in the Himalayas have always been in charge of most of the farm activities, while men often played a sporadic role in the production process. However, very few development programmes and extension services are working with women as farmers; most training, technologies, information, and financial support target men, with the assumption that it will positively

### Mainstreaming gender in mountain development programmes

1. Understand mountain specificities
2. Conduct a gender analysis
3. Acknowledge women's role in mountain livelihoods and food security
4. Integrate a gender perspective into all components of a programme
5. Develop a gender strategy adapted to the cultural context
6. Develop a gender sensitive monitoring system
7. Build local capacities
8. Expand the social capital of women
9. Increase access to technologies to reduce drudgery
10. Support women's aspirations to adopt new livelihoods
11. Support women's land rights and control over fundamental assets
12. Empower women
13. Involve men
14. Ensure senior managers lead
15. Empower the gender focal point
16. Make all project staff accountable
17. Select gender sensitive partners
18. Advocate for gender mainstreaming in mountain development

affect all members of the household equally. Few analyses are done to look at the gender dimensions of land use change, for example, and how it affects women's drudgery and their rights over land. There is a need to realign policies and approaches so that technical outreach, capacity building, and access to credit become more women focused and tailored to meet mountain women's needs.

#### 4. Integrate a gender perspective into all components of a programme

Gender is rarely properly mainstreamed in all components of a programme. Most of the time, some activities are added 'for women' and some gender issues are taken into account in some components of a programme, while totally overlooked in other components. For example, the projects assessed showed that supporting the creation of women's self help groups is an interesting strategy to increase women's access to financial resources and build their social capital. However, the gender perspective in farm production and land use change was not well acknowledged by the projects. Although activities targeting women have addressed important issues, a programme must look at the gender dimension of every component and make sure that it promotes equitable access to and control over assets for both women and men.

#### 5. Develop a gender strategy adapted to the cultural context

There is no single recipe for addressing gender issues; any strategy must be adapted to the social and cultural context in which the programme is being implemented. Addressing gender inequality requires challenging some cultural practices, otherwise change cannot happen. Customary land rights often deny women's ownership rights over the land, but they can also deny private ownership by men.

A gender strategy is not a description of specific interventions for women only. It is based on the findings of gender analyses and proposes an approach to address gender issues. A programme can make a real difference through its implementation strategy by increasing women's participation in decision making, recruiting women in the implementation team, and designing training programmes that reach women. This type of approach can contribute to empowering women, and making an important difference.

#### 6. Develop a gender sensitive monitoring system

A gender strategy has to be built on a good foundation. The gender perspective is rarely properly integrated into baseline studies. In the best cases, some questions are asked to women only, e.g., related to drinking water and hygiene. Usually, the basic unit for the baseline study is the household and the enumerators are meeting principally with the person considered to be the head of the household, generally considered to be a man although this is not always the case. We forget that women can have different, yet complementary, points of view about agriculture and community development. Also, if we do not have gender disaggregated data in the baseline study, it is difficult to integrate a gender perspective in the monitoring and evaluation system. Here again, it is important to design both quantitative and qualitative indicators to measure the impact of the programme on women and men (thus the need for gender disaggregated indicators) and on reducing gender inequality.

#### 7. Build local capacities

It is important to acknowledge the difficulties in working in the mountain context and the very low level of resources and capacities of mountain communities. A development strategy implemented in the mountains should include a component for building local capacities to mobilise communities, design development plans, manage project resources efficiently and equitably, and reduce social inequalities. Adopting an approach that empowers people certainly takes more time and more resources at the beginning of the project, but it contributes to the development of a sense of ownership, increases the possibility of longer-term impact, and can widen the project's outreach. In this sense, while designing programmes to build local capacities, care must be given to ensure that women participate equally in these initiatives, and that the capacity building activities address women's interests. In addition, it is equally important to develop the capacities of men to understand and address gender issues so that they can become allies.

### Implementation strategy

#### 8. Expand the social capital of women

Exposure to new ideas and new lifestyles is an important driver of change. The relative isolation of many mountain communities hampers, to some extent, their development. Men are usually much more mobile than women; they go downstream to trade or for wage labour, and they are the ones meeting with outsiders and participating in meetings.



For socio-cultural reasons, mountain women may have less access to the 'outside' world. Expanding mountain people's social capital is an important strategy for increasing their exposure to different livelihood options, services, and support. Development projects should not only 'provide' services and resources, they should contribute to linking mountain women with each other and with organisations that can support their initiatives. This is particularly important for women who have rarely had the opportunity to participate in decision making in their communities and require their needs to be addressed; such women have had even less opportunity to directly express their needs to concerned government organisations.

### 9. Increase access to technologies to reduce drudgery

Reducing women's drudgery is one of the major practical needs of mountain women and a good entry point for increasing women's participation in other components of a programme. Mountain women's workload is significant – an average of 15 to 17 hours a day, compared to men who work about 8 to 10 hours a day – and performed in conditions that affect their health. Development programmes implemented in the mountains must address the need for sustainable energy technologies to reduce women's drudgery, improve their health, and reduce pressure on natural resources. Interventions aimed at improving food security and farm productivity must pay particular attention to the impacts of new production methods on women's drudgery and provide technology suitable for women to use.

### 10. Support women's aspirations to adopt new livelihoods

In the context of socioeconomic and environmental changes, and because of the labour intensity of farm production – especially in the absence of men – mountain women may aspire to adopt new livelihood activities and reduce their involvement in agriculture. For example, a study conducted by ICIMOD in Uttarakhand on the feminisation of agriculture showed that, in the absence of men, women chose to reduce the number of livestock, which considerably reduced their drudgery. When supported by development programmes and involved in self help groups, women often opt for income generating activities that are not necessarily linked to traditional farm production. Development programmes implemented in the mountains can play an important role in supporting women's investment in new livelihood options: economic opportunities must not be reserved only for men. An important capacity building need in this regard is to increase women's capacity in market dealings, i.e., in simple accounting, market negotiations, and bargaining. This would not only contribute to the improvement of their households' wellbeing and empower women; it would also contribute to the economic development of the mountains.

### 11. Support women's land rights and control over fundamental assets

Supporting women's ownership and control over fundamental assets such as land and livestock is not just an issue of equity; it contributes to the resilience of the development of mountain communities. For any farmer, land is one of the most important assets. It represents more than access to land, it provides access to resources from agricultural programmes and financial institutions and it gives the landholder a status in society and a certain level of self reliance. As we know, even though women perform most of the farm work, they seldom own the land. Even in matrilineal societies, decisions over land use are mainly taken by a woman's brothers.

Besides the gender dimension of property, land rights remain one of the most sensitive issues everywhere in the mountains and rural areas, and many conflicts are related to access to and control over land. This makes it difficult to address this issue. However, any land reform or changes in land rights must look at gender dimensions and find entry points to increase women's control over and ownership of land.

Livestock is another important asset for mountain people; in some cases women own small livestock such as poultry, but the higher the market value of livestock, the more likely it is to be controlled by men. Financial resources are also often controlled by men. The low level of control women have over fundamental resources makes them more vulnerable in times of crisis. It also hinders their potential to invest in and develop new activities.

### 12. Empower women

More work needs to be done on the concept of empowerment, which is the key to addressing women's strategic needs and transforming gender and other social inequalities. There is no single recipe for empowering people. Empowerment requires a combination of interventions to support people in gaining skills, building confidence, and making choices. In development programmes, this often starts by supporting the creation of women's groups where women can develop a collective sense of power that can eventually be reflected at the personal level. Developing mechanisms to facilitate women's participation

in decision making at the community level is another important step towards empowering them. Increasing their access to fundamental assets not only increases their capacity to act, it also improves their status in their community and within their household.

### 13. Involve men

Although women bear the brunt of gender inequality, an approach reflecting the different vulnerabilities and needs of women and men – instead of focusing only on women – may have a greater impact on convincing men to discuss gender issues. Gender issues have to be recognised as social and economic issues, and men need to be more engaged in promoting gender equality. There are several examples of men supporting women, especially in the development of income generating activities but also in performing household work. These examples could be valuable in illustrating the benefits of this partnership for the whole household.

## Project team

### 14 Senior managers must lead

Senior managers must be made accountable for addressing gender issues through their programmes and for establishing a women friendly workplace. Senior managers often relegate gender mainstreaming within the project to the gender coordinator, thereby shedding responsibility. Senior management has to be sensitised to the fact that gender mainstreaming can only be institutionalised when the management ensures that this is the responsibility of each manager for their respective work or sector. To this end, project supervision missions must make this aspect a central concern for all missions. Further, senior management must establish a workplace environment that reflects the values they promote in the communities and towards their partners. They can play a critical role in encouraging their team to perform in promoting gender equality by valuing their contribution to achieving this goal.

### 15. Empower the gender focal point

The gender focal point in an organisation or project team should be able to influence the senior managers and partners. The role of the focal point should be to provide support in mainstreaming gender in the project; support the project team and the partners to analyse gender dimensions related to their sector of intervention; provide technical assistance in planning to ensure an equitable distribution of the project's resources and that women's needs are properly addressed; together with the project's team and the partners, develop a strategy to mobilise and increase women's participation in project activities; and participate in the monitoring and evaluation process to measure improvement in addressing gender issues and achieving gender equality. To ensure that gender mainstreaming becomes central to all interventions, the gender focal point should be made an integral member of the project monitoring and evaluation system.

### 16. Make all project staff accountable

Mainstreaming gender must be the responsibility of all programme/project team members, not only of the gender focal point. The capacity of programme staff to perform gender analysis and to integrate gender into a programme must be developed. Gender issues are too often understood as 'women's issues', and there is a tendency to relegate the responsibility for addressing these issues to specialised women's organisations or the gender focal point. However, gender issues are also development issues. Thus, addressing women's needs and transforming gender inequality requires a committed team willing to address social issues and not just implement project activities. The commitment must start with the leadership and management in guiding and monitoring, and identifying needs in terms of capacity building for the project staff and partners. Leaders and managers must make sure that sufficient resources are dedicated and planned to mainstream gender in all the interventions – not only the ones 'for women' – to ensure the involvement of women in different activities at all levels.

### 17. Select gender sensitive partners

Select partners that have experience working with women and are committed to gender equality. Even in more technical programmes, it is important for the project team to be able to encourage women's participation and increase their control over fundamental assets – it can even be a critical condition for the success and sustainability of the programme. If the technical partners do not have the capacity or are not gender sensitive, it could be very useful to add a partner with more experience in mainstreaming gender with the mandate to develop the capacity of other partners (instead of performing activities targeting women).

## 18. Advocate for gender mainstreaming in mountain development

Better ways must be developed to influence policies. Project partners do not always feel compelled to replicate project experiences in their strategies after the project ends. How we advocate for gender mainstreaming needs to be improved, showing the positive impacts not only for women, but for achieving the goals of sustainable development and mountain development.

## Conclusion

The mountains are changing. Many socioeconomic and environmental factors are offering new opportunities for women and men living in the mountains, but they are also presenting new challenges. Mountain communities are becoming more connected to the outside world through mobile phones and televisions. More mountain children are going to school. Men are migrating for longer periods. Roads are reaching territories that used to be isolated, increasing access to markets and services. This new context is already affecting mountain livelihoods and social and cultural patterns.

The question is: do these changes affect women and men in the same way? Do women and men face the same challenges and have the same capacity to seize new opportunities and adapt to the changes? Because of their critical role in mountain livelihoods, more attention must be given to the specific needs of mountain women. Development programmes implemented in the mountains must provide resources to reduce women's drudgery and increase their access to and control over fundamental assets. This will only be possible by challenging gender inequality and empowering women.

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**Individual gender assessment reports** (report summaries included on a CD-ROM in the back pocket of the printed publication and as annexes in the electronic publication)

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# Annexes





# Annex 1A: Gender Assessment of the Western Uplands Poverty Alleviation Project, Nepal

**Basundhara Bhattarai**, 2008

## Introduction

The Western Uplands Poverty Alleviation Project (WUPAP) is supported by the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) and implemented by the Ministry of Local Development in 11 hill and high mountain districts in the Mid Western and Far Western development regions of Nepal. Commencing in 2003, the project's goal is to strengthen the livelihood systems of the rural poor in the project districts. The project has five components: i) rural infrastructure development; ii) leasehold forestry and non-timber forest products (NTFPs); iii) smallholder agriculture development; iv) microfinance and marketing; and v) institutional development.

Beside the remoteness and lack of basic infrastructure in this region, the recent political conflict, extreme poverty, gender inequality, and social discrimination make it difficult to intervene in a sustainable way. Hence, it was important for the project implementation team to develop an intervention approach that would address poverty issues while tackling gender and social inequity and empowering people.

In order to address gender and social inequality, WUPAP adopted a gender and social equity strategy based on four pillars: 1) gender balance in project staff; 2) awareness raising on gender and social justice; 3) gender balance in the selection and formation of community organisations and in training; and 4) the promotion of women, children, and Dalits ('very low caste') as role models and agents for positive change. This strategy guided the implementation of project activities.

In addition, following IFAD's gender mainstreaming framework, WUPAP planned interventions aimed at:

- expanding women's access to and control over fundamental assets, notably by ensuring women's participation in the leasehold forestry programme and in community organisations for savings and credit;
- strengthening women's agency by building women's leadership through training and networking; and
- improving the wellbeing and easing the workloads of women by establishing mills, piped water supply, and pre primary schools in several villages.

In 2008, in collaboration with the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD) conducted a gender assessment of WUPAP. The assessment examined how effectively the project has addressed some key gender issues and empowered women in the project areas.

## Gender Issues in the Project Areas

There are deep-rooted social and gender inequalities in the division of labour, access to resources and power, and access to education, jobs, and benefits from development activities, as well as in participation in public and private decision making in the project areas. In general, women's social status depends upon men's and intersects with caste and ethnicity. Traditional practices such as *chhaupadi*, in which women are considered polluted and confined to cowsheds during menstruation and childbirth, are still prevalent. Women in the project area, as in other parts of the country, suffer from serious domestic violence. Polygamy is a common practice among Chhetris and Thakuris. Polyandry is also practised among Burmo-Tibetan groups in some parts of the project districts.

Irrespective of caste or ethnic group, the early marriage of both girls and boys is common. This has impacted on girls' access to education and the occurrence of early pregnancy, which affects their health, and can even endanger their life.

Women are usually not allowed to speak in public places. It is perceived as being badly behaved or of loose morals if a woman speaks out publicly, talks with men, or makes decisions independently. This is even worse for women who are small farmers or Dalits, who have low self-reliance and little scope for independent decision making. Women's role in project implementation is often reduced to that of unskilled labourers and they are rarely involved in decision making and management. Widows are marginalised and sometimes excluded from their houses. However, this is not the case for women from Burmo-Tibetan groups: for example, Lama women in Humla are actually quite active in community development, decision making, and implementation.

In general, men make decisions on everything related to the household economy, such as the sale or purchase of land, what crops to plant, shopping, housing, investment in energy, education, marriage, medical care, family planning, and travel, and participate in public activities, committees, and politics. Only women who have been involved in cash income generation can, to some extent, take decisions over their own income. Women in the project villages visited, especially those from Brahmin and Thakuri caste groups, were unlikely to have a say in investment decisions or in use of income, although they did manage all household assets and natural resources. Traditionally, women are kept out of major community management decisions.

The high incidence of poverty, limited farm production, lack of local jobs, and limited livelihood options compel men to migrate to cities or abroad (mainly to India). In the absence of men, women are becoming the principal farm producers. When men are out of the village, it is the women who carry on all the work related to agriculture and become the de facto heads of their households. However, women have limited legal rights over the land they cultivate or over the other productive resources that they nurture and use.

In addition to social disadvantages, living in a mountain area entails a heavy workload for women, who are responsible for fetching water and collecting fuelwood and fodder for livestock in a landscape characterised by steep slopes, remoteness, droughts, and harsh winters. These conditions take their toll on women's health. This problem is becoming more acute with the occurrence of longer periods of drought and with deforestation. As reported by women in different focus group discussions, it takes 4 to 12 hours to collect and carry one head load of fuelwood or grass from the nearby forest.

Husking and grinding grain to feed the family is another important task done by women and adds to their drudgery. Women either have to travel long distances with a load of grain on their back or grind it manually at home. In some project village development committees, they had to travel up to four days to and from the water mills to grind grain.

## Addressing Gender Issues

### Expand women's access to and control over fundamental assets

WUPAP's strategy to increase women's access to and control over fundamental assets included ensuring women's membership in leasehold forestry user groups and supporting the creation of savings and credit groups.

The leasehold forestry programme in Nepal aims to provide access to forest products to the poor and particularly to women. As women spend almost a third of their time collecting fodder and fuelwood, this intervention could have a meaningful impact on reducing their workload. Moreover, WUPAP promotes the exploitation of NTFPs as a source of income for leaseholders. However, this scheme presents some problems as only degraded forest land is eligible for leasehold forestry and it takes several years before forest products are sufficient to fulfil household needs and produce income. At the time the gender assessment was conducted, there was still an acute shortage of fuelwood and grass in the project areas, and women were still spending a considerable amount of time collecting these resources. Moreover, in the absence of other livelihood options, and due to the high incidence of poverty and the food crisis, men in the project districts were compelled to trade timber to make ends meet, contributing to deforestation. New livelihood options and alternative sources of energy must be part of the programme to reduce the pressure on natural resources.

Supporting community organisations to start savings and credit activities is a strategy proven to be effective in addressing the needs of mountain people. It provides an alternative to moneylenders, who demand high interest rates, and provides members with access to funds in emergencies. In the WUPAP project districts, people borrowed money to meet immediate needs; men took loans to pay for the cost of travelling to India for work, while women loaned money for medical fees and

school expenses. However, in the absence of income generating opportunities, loans were rarely used to create small enterprises or generate economic development.

### **Strengthen women's agency**

In the traditional setting of the uplands of the Mid and Far Western Development Regions, gender inequalities are very prominent and women participate very little in decision making. The WUPAP project took the initiative to promote the participation of women in community institutions, including in leasehold forestry user groups, where they represent up to 47 per cent of the members, and supported the creation of women-only committees. The project also offered training to develop women's leadership skills and legal awareness, and linked local women's organisations with larger women's organisations. As a result, some women's organisations supported by the project have started addressing issues beyond the project, such as alcoholism and domestic violence.

### **Improve wellbeing and ease workloads**

In the uplands of the Mid and Far Western Development Regions of Nepal, the level of work ('drudgery') required from women to ensure the basic survival of their household members is particularly high. Women spend several hours each day fetching water and collecting fuelwood and fodder. In addition, it can take many hours to carry grain to the water mills, the alternative being to grind the flour manually. The construction of more water mills has reduced women's workload. Whereas, prior to the project, women had to walk a day or more every 5 to 10 days to reach a mill, it now takes them about an hour. As the mills are closer, men have also started sharing this task.

However, WUPAP is not able to fulfil all the requests from other communities. Addressing women's needs and reducing their drudgery must be part of development plans at the regional and local levels; local communities should be empowered to influence development planners to this end. The management and maintenance of mills could provide an opportunity for income generation, and the project could look at developing the capacity of the poor to run this service for the rest of the community.

Fetching water to fulfil household needs or for livestock is another arduous task performed mainly by women. The project supported the installation of piped water and trained community members in maintenance. This type of intervention is important for alleviating the drudgery of women and children, and also contributes to the reduction of water-borne diseases. However, as very few women participated in maintenance training, women must rely on men to maintain the equipment. As a result, in some communities, the water system was already dysfunctional and women reported that the men who were responsible for the maintenance did not fulfil their duty properly. The existence of the infrastructure is not enough; there needs to be a management mechanism in place to ensure maintenance, a mechanism in which women must participate as they are the main beneficiaries and have a significant interest in keeping the equipment functioning.

The establishment of pre-primary schools in the WUPAP area has contributed to the reduction of women's drudgery by giving them some time during the four hours that their children are at school. Both boys and girls are sent to the pre-primary schools, which expands girls' access to a certain level of education.

## **Conclusion**

The area where the WUPAP project is being implemented is characterised by remoteness and a lack of basic infrastructure such as roads. This adds to the difficulty of working with and uplifting these very poor communities. The poverty level is so high that even basic needs are not met, which also makes mobilising the population very difficult. Some practical needs of women have been addressed by the project through the establishment of water mills, piped water, and pre-primary schools. However, it is not yet clear to what extent women exercise any control over these assets. Moreover, these interventions have been implemented in communities where women were empowered enough to participate in the community development planning process and where they could voice their needs.

WUPAP is addressing some of the specific issues that mountain women are facing through interventions aimed at reducing their drudgery and increasing their participation in decision making and community organisations. However, working in such remote and isolated areas without basic infrastructure is a real challenge and increases the difficulty of addressing gender

issues in a sustainable way. Additional creative interventions to tackle gender inequalities need to be experimented with. Communities must be supported to address their need for alternative energy. More effort must be made to address food insecurity by involving women in the process, particularly in the context of the increased out-migration of men in the project districts, which has led to the feminisation of mountain agriculture.

The project implementation team also needs to improve its understanding of the concept and practice of gender mainstreaming: the emphasis is still on women being perceived as a marginalised group.

To work with women at the community level and promote gender equity, it is important that the project team reflect on those values itself. A mechanism needs to be developed to welcome more women into the project team and ensure a women-friendly environment. The establishment of a gender focal point within the project with the role of supporting the project team in mainstreaming gender and monitoring the process and impacts would be a great asset.

Extract from Bhattarai, B (2008) *Gender Assessment of the Western Uplands Poverty Alleviation Project, Nepal*, a report submitted to ICIMOD, Kathmandu, Nepal (unpublished)



# Annex 1B: Guidelines for Mainstreaming Gender in the Western Uplands Poverty Alleviation Project

Prepared by ICIMOD, June 2010

## The Project

The Western Uplands Poverty Alleviation Project (WUPAP) is a joint endeavour of the Government of Nepal and the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD). The project started in 2003 in 11 districts of the Mid Western and Far Western development regions of Nepal. The goal of the project is to improve the livelihood systems of the rural poor in the project districts through a rights based approach towards sustainable development. The project has five main components: (i) leasehold forestry and non-timber forest production; (ii) rural community-based infrastructure development; (iii) crop and livestock development; (iv) microfinance and marketing; and (v) institutional development.

**Gender** refers to the culturally based expectations of the roles and behaviours of women and men.

IFAD 2003

Prior to the commencement of the project, an appraisal was carried out to define the priorities for the project to be supported by IFAD. The Appraisal Report clearly mentions the extent to which the project areas are deprived: the Mid and Far Western Regions are relatively inaccessible and remote; they are the most economically backward regions in Nepal, and have the highest incidence of poverty and the lowest scores in all demographic and human development indicators, with no exceptions (IFAD 2001).

The Ministry of Local Development is the executing agency for WUPAP. District development committees are the main executing bodies at the district level. The project partners are other district line agencies (district forest offices, district livestock offices, and district agriculture offices), the Local Development Fund Board (LDFB), and NGOs.

## Gender issues in the project area

The WUPAP area has strong gender and social inequalities that are deeply rooted in socio-cultural and economic institutions. This greatly affects the achievement of the project goal: to reduce poverty and promote sustainable development.

In general, the quality of life of women and girls is particularly poor in the project areas. Brahmin, Chhetris, Thakuris, and Dalits constitute the large majority of the population. This population practises the Hindu religion, which structures social organisations and relationships, as well as shaping gender roles and relationships. The rules and expectations imposed on a Hindu woman vary according to caste, and there seem to be more limitations on women from the so-called higher castes.

Child marriage is still practised and being a girl means a life of hardship. Not only are girls expected to take on an important share of the work performed by the women of the house, but they receive less food than male members. Few girls receive any education. Widows are very marginalised and rarely allowed to remarry. Polygamy is still practised and seems to lead to many cases of domestic violence.

Women from non-Hindu ethnic groups – Burmo-Tibetan groups, Magars, and Gurungs – have a better status in their households and community. They enjoy more equity in terms of ownership and participation in decision making (IFAD 2001, p 9). Girls from these groups have better access to education and child marriage is less common. Women from these groups are very active in community development activities, decision making, and implementation, and there is a long tradition of strong women's groups; they are also competent fundraisers (IFAD 2001, p 9).

Women in the project areas work up to 14 hours a day, compared to men who work about 8 hours. They spend most of their time doing household chores such as cooking, cleaning, collecting firewood, fodder, and water, and looking after the children and elderly. Apart from having sole responsibility for household chores, women play a major role in the management of natural resources and the household economy for the survival of family members. In general, men are more mobile and more involved in off-farm activities.

“Village women, of any caste or ethnic affiliation, are thus key persons in rural society and they play a major role in all aspects of natural resources management and household economy. As subsistence farmers, forest users, and livestock holders, women contribute more than men to the rural household economy. However, legally and practically they have no right to, nor control over, or ownership of, the land they cultivate and the natural resources they use.” (IFAD 2001, p 9)

The situation in the project areas relating to gender issues can be summarised as follows:

- With the frequent absence of men for trading and herding in the mountains, and for migration for seasonal employment in the mid-hills and India, women are responsible for holding the hill and mountain economy together.
- Despite bearing responsibility for the household economy and domestic workload, women are usually not in control of the income they contribute to.
- Women’s participation in the public domain is restricted by cultural norms and their low self-esteem and confidence; this reinforces the maintenance of power inequalities.
- Women spend most of their time providing the basic necessities for the subsistence of themselves and their family members. This rarely leaves them with time for other activities. (IFAD 2001, p 10)

### WUPAP’s efforts to address gender issues

Since the beginning of the project, WUPAP has made substantial efforts to address the needs of both women and men in the project areas. The project interventions strive to promote equity by favouring equitable access to project resources for women and other disadvantaged groups; increasing women’s participation in decision-making processes; building women’s social capital; and raising their awareness about their rights.

WUPAP has focused its interventions on the following areas.

#### Drudgery reduction

The project has attempted to reduce women’s drudgery by building small infrastructure, such as improved water mills, drinking water schemes, and pre-primary school buildings, and by facilitating access to energy efficient technology, such as improved cooking stoves and bio briquettes. Moreover, the project emphasised production of forage and fodder in homestead gardens and leasehold forests.

#### Drudgery reduction interventions

- Installation of improved water mills
- Construction of piped water mills
- Construction of pre-primary school buildings
- Grass forage/fodder production in leasehold forests
- Promotion of improved cooking stoves
- Construction of drinking water schemes
- Installation of the Dhatelo Oil Mill

#### Strengthening women’s agency

The project applies a combination of interventions aiming to build women’s agency, including capacity building, the creation of institutions that favour women’s participation in decision making, the reservation of at least 50% of leadership positions for women in community organisations and leasehold forestry users groups, and increasing access to information and participation in decision making. As a result, participation by women in public institutions has increased, as has their capacity to influence the decisions affecting their communities.

#### Strengthening women’s agency

- Increasing membership in community organisations and leasehold forestry users groups
- Making mandatory the representation of women as chairperson or in managerial positions in the formation of mixed community organisations
- Creation of women-only organisations
- Awareness raising on rights and gender equality
- Networking among village women
- Building partnerships with women’s organisations

## Expanding women's access to and control over fundamental assets

WUPAP strives to increase women's access to assets by supporting the formation of community organisations for savings and credit. The objective is to provide financial resources to women to invest in income generating activities. However, remoteness and lack of access to markets does not encourage women to make what are considered to be risky investments. Men are the main borrowers and credit is used to address immediate needs and travelling costs for migration to India for work.

## Expanding women's access to and control over fundamental assets

- Increasing access to financial resources through savings and credit community organisations
- Increasing access to natural resources through leasehold forestry

The promotion of women as leasehold forest users is another of WUPAP's initiatives that aims to increase women's access to natural resources. The objective is to increase their access to forest products and grasses to reduce their drudgery. However, the leased forest lands were relatively degraded when the project started and they still do not provide sufficient fuelwood and fodder. Therefore, women are still spending their time collecting those products.

## Objective

The objective of these guidelines is to provide a framework for mainstreaming gender in WUPAP to facilitate the achievement of the project's goal: to alleviate poverty in the western uplands of Nepal.

The guidelines are based on recommendations made in the Appraisal Report (IFAD 2001), the gender assessment conducted by ICIMOD in 2008 (Bhattarai 2008), IFAD's gender action plan and guidelines, and the latest information and thinking on gender mainstreaming in development projects. The guidelines are designed for WUPAP and address gender issues in the project area (districts in the Mid and Far Western Development Regions of Nepal) taking into account the project's strategy and five components (leasehold forestry and non-timber forest production; rural infrastructure development; crop and livestock development; microfinance and marketing; and institutional development).

**Gender mainstreaming** is the process by which reducing the gaps in development opportunities between women and men and working towards equality between them become an integral part of the organisation's strategy, policies, and operations, and the focus of continued efforts to achieve excellence.

Gender mainstreaming is fully reflected, also with other core priorities, in the mindset of the project's leadership and staff, its values, resource allocations, operating norms and procedures, performance measurements, accountabilities, competencies, and its learning and improvement processes.

IFAD 2003

The specific objective of these guidelines is to support the effective integration of gender into all components of the project. WUPAP works with partner organisations to expand women's access to and control over fundamental assets (capital, land, knowledge and technologies); strengthen women's agency; and improve their wellbeing.

## General Considerations

It is important for all members of the project team, including partner organisations, to understand the rationale behind mainstreaming gender in development projects. Here are some considerations:

- Gender roles and relations are set in particular socio-cultural settings, which differ from region to region and even from one ethnic group to another, as is the case in the uplands of the Mid and Far Western Development Regions of Nepal. However, these roles and relationships can be changed for the benefit of the whole society.
- Power relations are an issue that place women in a disadvantaged position relative to men. This affects a project's capacity to achieve the goal of reducing poverty and realise sustainable development.
- Even if a people-centred approach is followed and participatory tools used during project planning and implementation, it is not guaranteed that the perspective of socially excluded groups and women will be taken into account: social

structures and discrimination will limit the capacity of disadvantaged groups to participate effectively in decision making and in the overall activities of the project unless particular attention is given to their participation and priorities.

- Gender issues are greatly interlinked with other social inequalities such as caste, class, age, and ethnicity. Although poor men from so-called lower castes experience a range of discrimination based on their caste and class, women usually face additional discrimination because of their gender. Whatever their caste, class, or age, there is a strong preference towards men and boys, who enjoy some benefits purely on account of being male.
- Equity is not the equivalent of equality; it does not refer to the same amount of resources provided to everybody or the participation of the same number of people in an initiative. Equity is about fairness and it may necessitate the provision of more resources for members of the community who are more deprived, or setting different rules in order to increase participation of the voiceless.
- Gender issues are not only a concern for women: they are social issues that concern all members of the community. Therefore, reducing gender inequality is not a favour to women, but something that has ramifications for the development of the whole community. Such issues can also be the cause of conflict, poverty, and even death.
- The approach should be based on building a partnership between women and men to address community issues. It is also important to stress the importance of women supporting each other, whatever their caste or position in the family; women often reinforce inequalities among themselves.

**Gender equity** means fair treatment for both women and men, according to their respective needs. It may include equal treatment, or different treatment that is considered equivalent in terms of rights, benefits, obligations, and opportunities. It may require built-in measures to compensate for the historical and social disadvantages experienced by women.

**Gender equality** means that women and men have equal opportunities to access and control socially valued goods and resources.

**Empowerment** is about people taking control of their lives. It is about people pursuing their own goals, living according to their own values, developing self-reliance, and being able to make choices and influence – both individually and collectively – the decisions that affect their lives. For women and men to be empowered, conditions have to be created to enable them to acquire the necessary resources, knowledge, political voice, and organisational capacity.

IFAD 2003

## Mainstreaming Gender in WUPAP

WUPAP is committed and striving to institutionalise the gender perspective in all components of the project and in its organisational structure and management – from project management to communities.

### From project management...

#### Organisational structure and culture

A gender sensitive organisation not only hires women, it also provides working conditions that accommodate the parental roles of women and men; values the contribution of all team members; tries to address the limitations that women may have, for example, in terms of their capacity to travel; and pays equitable salaries based on competence, experience, academic background, and the special challenges of the job. It also tries to attain and maintain a gender balance among staff at all levels. Finally, an organisation promoting gender equality and women's empowerment at the community level must practise what it preaches: women working in the project must be respected and valued, free from sexual harassment, listened to when they voice their ideas, and able to influence and participate in decision making.

The recruitment and retention of female staff is still a challenge for WUPAP. The environment in which the project is being implemented makes it difficult to recruit both men and women: the project areas are remote; there are very few roads and basic infrastructure; poverty is high; and the population is often dispersed – all of which place additional constraints on mobilising people for development initiatives.



However, the gender assessment of WUPAP (Bhattarai 2008) reported some difficulties related to the working conditions and even some attitudes and practices in WUPAP that either do not favour the recruitment of women or shorten their involvement in the project.

### Action

WUPAP is adopting an Organisational Gender Equity Policy to establish favourable conditions to increase the recruitment of female staff and to promote the values of gender equality and empower women. More precisely, WUPAP

1. Favours the recruitment of women at all levels of the organisation (not only as social mobilisers, but also in management positions); in some cases WUPAP may have to recruit a woman with less experience, but with enthusiasm to further develop her capacity and commitment to the project's goal. This should not be considered a favour to women to the detriment of men, but as an effort to build the local capacities of women for the benefit of the project and local development;
2. Applies a maternity and paternity leave policy;
3. Supports childcare facilities for its staff;
4. Allows flexible working arrangements for mothers;
5. Has a zero-tolerance harassment policy; harassment includes discriminatory behaviours and attitudes, and language and pictorial (graphic) material that can offend women;
6. Provides equitable salaries based on competencies, experience, and academic background;
7. Provides equitable access to the resources necessary to implement the project, such as transportation, communication tools, financial resources for field work, and so forth;
8. Offers financial incentives for staff acknowledging the difficulties of working in remote mountain areas;
9. Regularly assesses the working environment and gives staff members opportunities to express their level of satisfaction and suggest ways to improve their working conditions;
10. Values the contribution of all staff members to the project by acknowledging their involvement, listening to their opinions and suggestions, and involving them in decision making related to the project;
11. Organises field work in a way that facilitates women's travel (for example, women are not compelled to go to the field alone; special arrangements are made when women have to stay overnight in a village to ensure their safety);
12. Strives to offer a friendly working environment and expects the collaboration and support of men working in the project in maintaining a women-friendly workplace;
13. Builds the leadership capacity of women project team members through training and exposure visits; and
14. Includes the commitment to promote gender equality in the terms of reference of every staff member (not only the gender focal points or community mobilisers), and holds all staff members accountable for, and evaluates them, in terms of achieving the goal of gender equality

### Gender focal point

The role of a gender focal point is to support the efforts made by the project in each sector of intervention to address the differential roles of women and men, and reduce gender inequalities. This person must have the ability to conduct gender analyses; identify proper interventions to address needs and ensure equitable access to project resources; define strategies to effectively empower women, increase their participation in project activities, and increase their control over significant assets; and assess the impacts of project interventions on women and men and on reducing gender inequalities. The gender focal point must have the capacity to influence the leadership, managers, and partners of the project; therefore, it is important to take the status of this person in the project's structure into consideration. The gender focal point must not be solely responsible for looking at the gender dimension, or implementing activities 'for' or 'with' women: this is the responsibility of each member of the project team. The role of the gender focal point is to accompany the process.

### Action

WUPAP establishes a gender focal point with the following mandate:

1. Accompany the project team and project partners in conducting gender analyses and collecting gender disaggregated data for the planning and monitoring processes
2. Support the planning of project activities (in collaboration with partners) to ensure that project resources are equitably distributed and contribute to addressing women's needs and reducing gender inequalities, or that they at least do not further increase gender inequalities
3. Organise capacity building activities for project staff and partners to strengthen the gender mainstreaming process – notably in conducting gender analyses, and in planning and monitoring processes

4. Participate in regular reviews and monitoring processes to assess progress in reducing gender inequalities, empowering women, and addressing their needs
5. Develop strategies to increase or strengthen the participation of women in decision making
6. Develop an information package for grassroots women and men about gender equality, women's rights, and human rights to encourage social change and the abandonment of nefarious practices that affect women
7. Link with different organisations capable of addressing the unmet needs of women (that require interventions that are beyond the project's mandate), and that support women's empowerment and the interaction of women's community-based organisations with larger networks
8. Provide recommendations to improve the workplace and make it more women friendly

### Partners

WUPAP is being implemented in partnership with different types of organisations – government organisations, NGOs, and community-based organisations. This strategy helps to address the diverse issues in the project area by pooling a large range of resources and expertise. The level of sensitivity of the project partners to gender issues is important and affects their capacity to address women's needs. Above all, a lack of sensitivity or of willingness to integrate a gender perspective into their interventions may challenge the capacity of partner organisations to achieve project goals. In some cases, it can even widen gender inequalities. Therefore, integrating a gender perspective into the project must not be the sole responsibility of the WUPAP team, nor of the partner NGO specialised in addressing gender issues. Even if their field of intervention is technical, partner organisations must be aware of the potential differential impact of their interventions (and their approach to implementation) on women and men. They also have to look at gender roles and the effectiveness of their approach: With whom are they working to ensure the viability and success of the intervention? Who has more knowledge and skills, and whose knowledge and skills must be strengthened? Project partners must be aware that, with the increasing out-migration of men from the western uplands, the feminisation of mountain livelihoods is increasing. This means that women should be included even in technical interventions – they must participate in consultations, planning initiatives for their community, and decision making. Their capacity in management and even in the maintenance of equipment must also be developed. This does not mean that men should be excluded from every intervention: it means that women have to be included in all of them.

### Action

WUPAP coordinates/facilitates partner interventions to address the differential needs and roles of women and men with an approach that empowers people. More precisely, WUPAP

1. Raises awareness in partner organisations about gender issues and their impacts on their sectors of intervention by organising training sessions and exposure visits and developing knowledge sharing materials;
2. Ensures that an equitable number of women are participating in partner initiatives;
3. Ensures that women from the target groups have equitable access to the project's resources, including the services provided by its partners;
4. Monitors how women and men are/have been benefiting from its partners' interventions;
5. Encourages the collaboration of 'technical' partners with other organisations experienced in addressing gender;
6. Mentions the commitment to address gender issues and to mainstream gender in all new written agreements with partner organisations; and
7. Makes a commitment to, and experience in, addressing gender issues a criterion for selecting new partners.

### Project cycle

It is well acknowledged that the gender perspective must be integrated into all components of the project cycle. So far, WUPAP has strived to look at this dimension, but has experienced difficulties in taking this dimension into consideration during the planning process while planning what are considered more technical interventions and in budgeting aspects. It was difficult to look at the human perspective of technical parts of the project. This is where a gender analysis is important: Who is going to be affected positively and negatively by the intervention? How are men and women going to be affected? Who has more interest? What do the different stakeholders need in order to maintain equipment? What could be the obstacles that prevent some stakeholders from benefiting from the intervention? Are there social/power relations that can challenge the implementation/viability/success of an activity? The project's annual review must also report on the project's achievements in reducing gender inequalities, addressing women's needs, and empowering women. Likewise, the partners must also be accountable and reflect on their achievements.

## Action

WUPAP integrates the gender perspective into all components of the planning process. More precisely, WUPAP

1. Identifies the stakeholders in each activity and pays particular attention to ensuring equitable benefits for women and men;
2. Supports the participation of women from the community in the elaboration of annual plans at the community/local level;
3. Ensures that the community develops plans that reflect both women's and men's choices – particularly if they are different;
4. Allocates sufficient budget funds to address the differential needs of women and men in all components of the project, and supports initiatives to reduce gender inequalities and empower women;
5. Regularly monitors the impacts of the project on women and men, including on addressing women's needs, reducing gender inequalities, and empowering women, and develops a set of indicators for this purpose; and
6. Requires all partners to report on achievements in addressing women's needs, reducing gender inequalities, and empowering women in the annual review.

## Capacity building

The gender assessment carried out in 2008 (Bhattarai 2008) reported that the level of awareness on gender and equity issues is still low, especially among district line agencies and male members of community organisations. One reason for this is the low emphasis given by the project to raising awareness on gender. As a result, the gender perspective was perceived as implementing activities for women or increasing the number of women participating in project activities. Gender mainstreaming is much more engaging: it requires looking at the gender dimension in every component of the project. Since then, WUPAP has made many efforts to raise awareness about gender inequalities and build the capacity of the project's partners to integrate gender in their respective interventions.

Capacity building does not always require the organisation of training; it can be done by sharing information and experiences among partner organisations; organising exposure visits; documenting gender issues and best practices; and developing guidelines for each sector. It can even be done by celebrating achievements or highlighting a particular partner's results in order to get the attention of other partners. Training itself has proven to be of little benefit and rarely changes how people work; follow up and encouragement are necessary to make change happen.

WUPAP should also strive to recruit staff and to partner with organisations that show an interest in, and commitment to, addressing gender issues through their work, and should value experience in this field. It makes it much easier to build capacity to mainstream gender when people are convinced of the importance of this.

There is a range of capacity building that can be organised for different stakeholders: the project team, government partners, local NGOs, and community-based organisations. The training for each group must be customised according to their field of intervention and level of education. It should be practical, and long theoretical presentations should be avoided. For example, training on human rights and women's rights are more useful to community-based organisations than a general training on gender. Government partner organisations need practical guides on integrating gender – addressing the differential needs of women and men – with proof that it improves their capacity to deliver their services, rather than principles and theory on what is gender. A series of short training sessions can have a greater impact on building people's capacity and maintaining a certain level of interest because they provide for regular interaction and reflection.

### Favouring women's participation in training

- Involve both women and men as trainers/facilitators
- Prepare an appropriate schedule, duration, and suitable place to accommodate women's constraints and limitations (for example, village-based training with a flexible schedule)
- Organise a temporary childcare centre for women with young children
- Pay the travel, accommodation, and food costs for an accompanying person to take care of children during training
- Ensure that there are at least two women participants from each settlement so that female participants are not alone

Gurung et al. 2009c

## Action

WUPAP contributes to raising awareness and building capacity among project staff and partners on effectively mainstreaming gender through the project. More precisely, WUPAP

1. Organises workshops on gender mainstreaming for all project partners with the content adapted to the type of intervention and education level of each group (government agencies, main NGOs, local NGOs, and community-based organisations); the training sessions cover simple gender analysis and planning tools;
2. Accompanies community-based organisations during their planning process to facilitate the integration of a gender perspective in development plans;
3. Makes sure that all new staff members and partners participate in an introductory training in their first three months with the project;
4. Organises regular interaction programmes for sharing and learning within the project team and with partners and community-based organisations;
5. Evaluates training/capacity building activities and assesses the utility and implementation of acquired knowledge and skills;
6. Holds training sessions for villagers in the villages as much as possible to increase the possibility of women participating;
7. Organises training in places and at times suitable for women participants;
8. Ensures the equitable participation of women in technical training;
9. Proposes training that addresses women's interests; and
10. Strives to ensure the participation of women as facilitators and trainers.

## ...to communities

### Institutional development and strengthening women's agency

WUPAP is facing difficulties in engaging poor women in the participation process. Their social status, education, economic situation, access to resources, language, and experiences represent real obstacles to their meaningful participation in project activities. Women lack confidence in dealing with new people and contributing meaningfully.

There are many levels of participation, from attending a meeting, to expressing views, and influencing and making decisions. There are many reasons why a project like WUPAP tries to increase women's participation: it improves the efficiency and effectiveness of the project, contributes to achieving the goal of reducing poverty, and improves the wellbeing of rural communities. Furthermore, in the context of the intensification of the feminisation of the mountains, it makes sense to work with the people staying in the villages to ensure the viability of project outcomes.

However, increasing women's participation is too often associated only with increasing the number of women participating in an initiative or a community group. Although this is an important first step, it is not enough. Conditions must be created to make women feel at ease in sharing their opinions, expressing disagreement, making recommendations, and influencing decisions. In many cases, it is a good strategy to support the creation of women-only groups so that they build their confidence and skills in negotiating and communicating. When women are integrated in a mixed group, men must be made aware of the usefulness of listening to what women have to say, particularly when their point of view is different. Their role in the household and in the community is different from men's and they can bring new information and a new perspective, which can help the group to make better decisions. Needless to say, it is important to ensure that women participate in leadership roles in the project and partner organisations as well. This is an aspect of WUPAP's interventions that brings about significant changes, as women share the leadership of most of the community-based organisations supported by the project.

Finally, in order to increase women's participation in project activities, WUPAP needs to further address the obstacles to their participation: heavy workloads, lack of self confidence, mistrust among the members of the community, the tendency of the elite to monopolise resources and take over leadership roles in the community, and men's reluctance to let women play a leadership role.

An important consideration is the general exclusion of women from so-called lower castes, widows, and women from other socially excluded groups. They may be artificially included in the group to please the project team, but their participation is likely to be limited to merely attending meetings. In the project areas, the population is very deprived, and there is usually



a strong reluctance to make a distinction between social groups with the concern that some may get more resources because they are more deprived. There is an increasing trend in Nepal to condemn programmes that provide resources exclusively to Dalits or some Janajatis, to the exclusion of Brahmins. However, the fact remains that some groups are excluded because of their social status and rarely benefit from development interventions, even when they are targeted. In order to ensure equitable access to the project, WVUPAP should not hesitate to implement specific activities and reserve resources for the most excluded groups. This may require, for example, the creation of Dalit women's organisations. This scheme would have the same objective: to strengthen their agency and build their self confidence and capacity to manage resources and address their own issues.

### Meaningful participation is possible

- when women have access to information
- when they are expressing their views
- when their views are listened to and discussed
- when they ask questions for information and clarification
- when they can influence decision making
- when decision making integrates their concerns
- when decisions addressing women's concerns are implemented

(Gurung and Leduc 2009)

### Action

WVUPAP continues its support to strengthen women's agency and increase women's participation in all project components. More precisely, WVUPAP

1. Supports the creation of women-only groups in communities where women are less empowered; an effort is made to ensure the inclusion of women from the castes and ethnic groups that are usually excluded, and to support women's leadership in mixed groups;
2. Strengthens the capacity of women members of community groups in terms of management, leadership, communication, and any other skills they need to develop to feel confident and be effective;
3. Facilitates cross-learning between women's groups;
4. Ensures equitable membership and leadership in leasehold forestry user groups and other community-based organisations supported by the project;
5. Raises the awareness of men and elites about the usefulness of women's participation in decision making at the community level;
6. Develops the capacity of community-based organisations, including leasehold forestry user groups and the savings and credit groups, to adopt a participatory and gender sensitive management approach;
7. Develops the capacity of its project partners, including government organisations and NGOs, to work with women and adopt a gender sensitive participatory approach to working with communities; and
8. Recruits women, and partners with local NGOs with female staff, to work with and mobilise women from every caste and ethnic group at the community level

### Women's drudgery reduction

Women in the project area have to cope with a heavy workload; they work about 14 hours a day compared to men's 8 hours. Besides the usual maintenance of the household and the care given to family members, they have to fetch water, collect fuelwood and fodder, and perform most of the farm work. With the increasing trend of male labour migration, their workload is further increased. In addition, they are expected to participate in project activities and community-based organisations.

In this context, reducing women's drudgery is not a luxury. It addresses a wide range of concrete needs for women thereby freeing their time and improving their effectiveness in conducting their tasks, and also improving their health.

The component of WVUPAP's project on infrastructure development contributes to addressing the issue of women's workload. To date, WVUPAP has dedicated important resources to reducing women's drudgery by introducing a number of technologies that have had a positive impact and been appreciated by women. It is, however, not possible to spread this type of support to the whole area, and the partners from government organisations and local development bodies must integrate this type of intervention into their programmes and budget.

As the role of women in farm activities and food production is significant in the project areas, WUPAP can look at other types of technology better adapted to women's physiology that would ease production processes.

While men are the main recipients of technical training provided for the maintenance of small infrastructure, they are not necessarily the main users. This reinforces women's dependency on men. Maintenance training must be provided to women as well. At least 33% of each users' committee must be composed of women.

### Action

WUPAP continues to strengthen interventions for reducing women's drudgery. More precisely, WUPAP

1. Facilitates bottom-up planning processes by local authorities and other line agencies to help them in selecting appropriate technologies and allocating resources for building/improving local infrastructure, as well as providing access to technology;
2. Identifies technologies and production methods that will ease women's farm workload;
3. Provides information on the existence of drudgery reduction technologies (notably energy efficiency technologies) for households and farms so that they can incorporate the acquisition of these technologies into local development plans;
4. Builds the technical capacity of women to maintain small infrastructure; and
5. Builds the capacity of savings and credit organisations to mobilise resources to acquire drudgery reduction technologies and for building and maintaining small infrastructure.

### Leasehold forestry and non-timber forest production

Leasehold forestry is a scheme proposed by the government of Nepal to provide the poor with access to land. This is an important component of WUPAP's project with the objectives of improving forest cover and managing forest resources, generating income, and reducing women's drudgery. The project deploys particular efforts to ensure the equitable participation of women in leasehold forestry user groups. However, only degraded forests are leased, and in most places it will take many years for the forest to be replenished and become productive. As the project works with the poor and they have very limited resources to invest in the necessary inputs to rehabilitate the forests, the objectives are far from being attained.

### Action

WUPAP is strengthening its efforts to support leasehold forestry user groups. More precisely, WUPAP:

1. Provides the necessary inputs to leasehold forestry user groups to accelerate the recovery of the leasehold forest land; and
2. Supports the establishment of home gardens and plots to grow fodder and some species for fuel.

### Crop and livestock development

Although crop and livestock development is an important component of the project (notably to improve food security), and despite the fact that women play a major role in farm production and livestock raising, the gender assessment of the project in 2008 showed that less than a quarter of the participants in the training events in this area were women (Bhattarai 2008). There may be many reasons for the limited participation of women: the place or time of the training may have been inconvenient for women; women may not be interested in the types of crops and livestock promoted; the habit that men are the ones that participate in training; lack of time to participate in training; lack of awareness on behalf of the trainers about the role of women in farm activities; or the provision of project resources for crop and livestock development to men/household heads/land owners. This needs to be investigated further.

### Action

WUPAP increases women's access to the resources related to crop and livestock development. More precisely WUPAP

1. Establishes a quota to ensure that at least 30% of participants are women, or organises training for women-only;
2. Identifies what crop and livestock species women would be interested in developing and invests in those species;
3. Informs its partners about women's training preferences; and
4. Ensures that the resources provided for crop and livestock development are managed/utilised by the women who have participated in training.

## Microfinance and marketing

The project has supported the creation of savings and credit organisations at the local level. Some organisations are women-only and others are mixed. The objectives are to increase, to some extent, the financial security of rural households and provide financial resources for investment in microenterprises. Despite the high level of poverty in the project areas, most organisations were able to mobilise savings from their members. However, even when women are dominant among the members, they rarely borrow money – the majority of borrowers are men. Moreover, the money borrowed is not used to create microenterprises, but to fulfil basic needs or cover the cost of migrating for work. A major reason why people hesitate to invest in microenterprises is remoteness, lack of market linkages, and lack of market knowledge. In addition, with the numerous tasks women have to perform and their already heavy workload, they may be reluctant to take on another risky activity that may add to their stress and insecurity. Moreover, they may be not interested in developing and investing time in income generating activities when they have little control over the financial resources of the household.

## Action

WUPAP supports women's initiatives in developing microenterprises. More precisely, WUPAP

1. Identifies, together with women, potential enterprises that could be profitable and analyses the value chain development of those enterprises;
2. Promotes the creation of cooperatives with exclusively female members and management to ensure their control over the financial resources;
3. Facilitates market linkages;
4. Facilitates business contacts among women;
5. Organises functional literacy training for women;
6. Builds women's capacity in business management and marketing; and
7. Provides financial support to women's cooperatives and develops their linkages with financial institutions

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# Annex 2: Gender Assessment of the Uttarakhand Livelihoods Improvement Project in the Himalayas

Manjari Mehta, 2008

## Introduction

The twin objectives of gender equality and women's empowerment underpin the International Fund for Agricultural Development's (IFAD's) work in poverty reduction. A central component of its programmatic work is to expand poor women's access to and control over key resources, provide them with technologies to ease their work burden, and develop their capacities in order to enable them to take a more pro-active role in decision making within their households and communities.

This vision of empowering poor rural women underpins the IFAD-funded Uttarakhand Livelihoods Improvement Project in the Himalayas (ULIPH), which was initiated in 2004 to run for a period of eight years. Managed by the Uttarakhand Gramya Vikas Samiti (UGVS) and supported by a Social Venture Capital Company (SVCC) that provides business development services, ULIPH (commonly known as Aajeevika, which means 'livelihoods' in Hindi) works with approximately 40 per cent of the total population in 17 development blocks in 5 districts in Almora and Garhwal. In keeping with IFAD's mandate, the project has identified and works with the most underprivileged households – with a specific focus on women – to improve their quality of life and income via interventions to reduce drudgery, promote livelihood opportunities, and strengthen local institutions so that they can eventually become vehicles for social and economic development in their communities.

Seeking to determine Aajeevika's success in integrating IFAD's gender mainstreaming strategy into its programmatic work, this report focuses on self help groups (SHGs) and drudgery-reduction interventions in order to

- assess the project's work in developing and strengthening self help groups and reducing women's drudgery;
- determine the success of the above in addressing women's and men's practical and strategic needs, and in changing gender relations sufficiently to enable women to play a more proactive role in decision making;
- identify components of the project that are working well and those that need to be re-evaluated; and
- offer suggestions on how to strengthen gender mainstreaming at the field/project, organisational, and policy levels.

The bulk of the work feeding into this assessment was done over a two-month period in June and July 2008 and included a series of interviews with project stakeholders, including stakeholders from the grassroots level.

## Gender Issues in Uttarakhand Prior to the Project

Three broad features have shaped the face of gender issues in Uttarakhand over the course of the post-independence years: the increasing dependence of households on markets to meet production and consumption needs, male out-migration, and an agricultural system that is based largely on the labour of women. These factors have reinforced the historically patriarchal nature of mountain society, in which men have held de jure control over productive resources and make all important decisions. Today, with access to off-farm incomes increasingly essential to meet basic household needs, who earns and who controls money has far-reaching actual and symbolic implications for gender relations. When men earn the income and women do the unpaid work it reinforces notions of male ownership and headship, whilst at the same time contributing to the perception that unpaid work such as subsistence farming is not really 'work'. Women's lack of access to income-generating activities and their dependence on men as the income generators, even when they are de facto head of their households, renders invisible their contribution to the domestic and farming economy at various levels.

Migration is a major livelihood strategy of rural households throughout these mountain districts, driven by rural poverty, diminishing subsistence production, and chronic under- and unemployment. Migration tends to be highly gender-specific:



typically it is men who leave their villages to engage in off-farm activities in neighbouring hill towns or further afield in the plains, while women remain behind to maintain homesteads and family farms.

Such migration has short-term and long-term consequences; it affects labour allocation and the production patterns of rural households, influences intergenerational and gender relations in both positive and negative ways, and, in the very best of situations, opens up households to both economic and social remittances (that mix of ideas, images, beliefs, and values that migrants bring home with them). Equally, the absence of able-bodied men for considerable periods of time, coupled with the growing accessibility of primary and secondary education, represents a significant loss in the availability of household labour.

Women, children (particularly girls), and the elderly tend to be the ones who have to pick up the slack and whose drudgery is intensified. This is borne out by the findings of the baseline survey, which mirrors a broader pattern of, on the one hand, households benefiting from the income generated through migration-related activities, and on the other, families left behind experiencing adverse effects in terms of increased workloads for women and the pressure of having to carry responsibility without the necessary support to facilitate their work (such as money to hire in labour or the ability to raise collateral for loans).

Despite the fact that over the course of the last 25 years mountain societies have been brought closer to the orbit of state institutions and markets, as a constituency, mountain women remain as marginalised as ever. Mountain women face a host of challenges that range from heavy workloads to limited access to financial, livelihood, and health services, and limited or no control over productive resources and decision-making processes.

## Addressing Gender Issues in Uttarakhand

ULIPH was initiated in 2004 and works in Tehri, Uttarkashi, and Chamoli districts (in Garhwal) and Bageshwar and Almora districts (in Kumaon). The project is working on two levels. The first phase of the project emphasised promoting self help groups, providing women with the basics of micro-credit and lending, and introducing drudgery reducing interventions to help alleviate women's workload. In addition, the project aimed in small measure, through some of these interventions, to help improve farm production and promote cash crops. The second phase, which began in the latter part of 2006 and is being carried out by the Uttarakhand Parvatiya Aajeevika Samvardhan Company (UPASaC), builds on this prior community mobilisation, working with SHG members to plan, develop, and manage micro-entrepreneurial livelihood activities, facilitating linkages with financial institutions, and connecting producers to markets. Together, these two 'wheels' of the project hope to strengthen the capacity of community-based organisations, and subsequently, through the formation of cooperatives and federations, to encourage participation in micro-enterprises that will improve the quality of life and household incomes of the most vulnerable members of these rural communities.

### Self help groups and UPASaC

Self help groups are the cornerstone of the project. The project expects that through their membership in these groups, women will learn how to participate in democratic processes, develop their ability to engage in alternative livelihood activities that are best suited to their resources, skills, and interests, and increase their awareness of how to preserve and regenerate their local natural resources.

In both Uttarkashi and Almora, women of all ages talked about how becoming part of a group had been a positive force in their lives, at a minimum providing an opportunity to meet in a context that lies outside the daily toil of domestic and field work, affording them a place to relax and talk, away from the watchful eye of older and often critical relatives. There are instances of group membership encouraging women to engage in labour-sharing such as working in each other's fields, going into forests together, and working together to build check dams and protect fields from wild animals. One issue that lit up many faces was how SHG members have learned to sign their own names and handle money, and how this has given them greater visibility and respect within their households. They agreed that becoming a member of an SHG has helped build their confidence in their own abilities and taught them a range of skills; they now recognise that unity is essential to accomplish anything.

When asked what the biggest benefit of belonging to SHGs was, women invariably said having access to money whenever they require it, without having to fill out paperwork and take time off to deal with the formal banking system. Loans are

covering a range of needs: children's school fees, books and clothing, seeds, minor medical expenses, the purchase of animals, and purchase of household necessities when income generated from off-farm sources is either not available or late in coming. In addition to functioning as a lending organisation for the small domestic needs of their members, a number of SHGs in both districts are also developing nurseries for fodder plants and vegetable seedlings, and several women are generating small amounts of income through the sale of vermi-compost to fellow villagers.

Among the members of the SHGs there is a palpable enthusiasm. What is striking is the confidence exuded by many of the women – this is evidenced by the pride with which they talked of how participation in the group has opened them up to new knowledge, taught them to sign their names, and encouraged them to envision new possibilities.

There is evidence that the success of SHGs in bringing members together in small savings and credit and income-generating activities is encouraging men to form groups of their own and, in the meantime, to attend and/or support the activities of their women. This last point is an important one. Interestingly, it is women's participation in SHGs, rather than in the drudgery reduction initiatives, that, in small measure, seems to be bringing about changes at the household level in terms of division of labour. The impression given by the women was that they receive encouragement from their men and, better still, support in the sharing of household chores to enable them to attend SHG meetings. This, according to many women, differs considerably from the situation that prevailed at the start of the project when it was not unusual for women participating in groups to be subjected to openly hostile behaviour and snide remarks.

The men interviewed in Uttarkashi, who belong to all-male SHGs, also exuded enthusiasm; this is an indication of the kind of energy that UPASaC can build on. At the same time their motivation for joining such groups differed from women's: they seem to belong to better-off households and their money was being used to learn to drive and members were saving towards investing in vehicles.

UPASaC is a new concept that envisages the marrying of a business enterprise model with social development activities. Its role is to connect SHGs with financial institutions to establish cash credit limits and support villagers in their efforts to develop their micro-entrepreneurial potential. At the field level, business promoters identify potentially viable sub-sectors to support alternative farm and non-farm livelihoods. These include poultry production based on a small-scale backyard model, which is more conducive to being run by women, organic agriculture, dairy farming, eco-tourism, and off-farm service sector activities, including small-scale repair shops, and so on.

### **Drudgery reduction interventions**

The drudgery reduction component is the most visible and arguably the most successful component of ULIPH's work. Why this is so is not hard to understand: these interventions try to address in very concrete ways the day-to-day concerns that women face.

The drudgery reduction interventions aim to address the situation of women engaged in subsistence agriculture, which is highly labour intensive but with low productivity, and for which the major work burden rests with women. Two other characteristics of the agricultural regime that some of the drudgery reduction interventions are attempting to tackle are: i) the centrality of animal husbandry in providing traction and farmyard manure (typically the only source of fertiliser); and ii) socio-cultural proscriptions against using oxen for anything other than traction and threshing.

SHGs serve as the nodal points through which drudgery reduction interventions are introduced into communities via demonstrations and with the expectation that they will then be adopted by individual households. The measures include improved tools (such as lighter scythes that are easier for women to handle), vermi-composting, fast-growing grasses to augment fodder supplies, plastic (lighter) water pitchers, cattle troughs, and the training of bullocks to cart manure and stones, and for other labour-intensive activities. Other interventions include smokeless cooking stoves and threshers.

An internal study conducted in three villages in Chamoli district revealed that, on average, two to three hours per woman per day is saved by the project's drudgery reduction interventions (napier grass, vermi-composting, and so forth) – a net saving of 38 person days per year. The saved time is being utilised by woman for their healthcare, taking care of children more effectively, and engaging in some income-generating activities.

There are, however, certain issues that need further examination. Most importantly, while some of these drudgery reduction interventions are easing women's workloads, it is not clear whether they are contributing to changes in gender relations. To what extent are some interventions (such as mechanical threshers) ending up in the hands of men whilst leaving the more arduous manual labour to women? This is a significant point – substantiated by considerable empirical evidence from other rural contexts throughout the subcontinent – which the project team must be sensitised to.

## Convergence activities

Aajeevika's 'convergences' with other programmes are innovative, enabling the project to tap into a range of resources to supplement its work and minimise the replication of work. Efforts to identify socially and physically vulnerable categories of people are a particularly important component of this work, especially as these tend to be the most invisible and least heard.

Convergences are built with institutions working on, or responsible for, issues that tangentially or directly relate to the project's concerns. These include government departments, district line agencies (such as those dealing with social welfare, agriculture, health, education, forestry, and horticulture), and partner NGOs, as well as others such as the People's Science Institute based in Dehra Dun, and trusts like the Baba Haidakhan Trust and the Ratan Tata Trust. This has enabled the project to work more effectively on shared areas of concern by tapping into other funding sources, and hence to address a growing array of issues that are beginning to emerge out of its ongoing work.

Instances of convergences to date include the following:

- The establishment of health camps in conjunction with charitable trusts and medical practitioners associated with them, providing SHG members with much-needed access to primary healthcare and information without much investment on the part of the project.
- Tie-ups with the Indira Mahila Samiti Yojna, the government child and woman development programme, and capacity building in organic farming, soil and seed quality, and insect/pest management – activities which feed into wider drudgery reduction issues.

## Some Weaknesses

### Women focus versus gender mainstreaming

Notwithstanding all that is going well, there are inevitably certain shortcomings in the project's strategy and implementation of gender issues. These include

- insufficient attention to bringing men on board;
- too much emphasis on building women's competencies in relation to economic activities to the exclusion of related needs and issues;
- inadequate attention to exploring what women's strategic gender needs and concerns are;
- lack of clarity between Aajeevika's and UPASaC's roles and a possible conflict between the former's social/gender equity approach and the latter's business promotion concerns; and
- too much attention given to meeting targets as dictated by the project's mandate, with a resulting lack of focus on process and quality.

The issue of 'where are the men?' invariably came up in discussions with men, block-level workers, and even women SHG members. Everyone, in one way or another, was aware of the fact that incorporating men more actively into the project makes both tactical and strategic sense, and that community development can only be advanced if both genders are working together. A few of the women met, speaking of the importance of self-motivation and initiative, said that moving forward would only become a reality with cooperation between women and men. This is not to say that men are not involved in the project's capacity building initiatives: men are included in all trainings, workshops, and exposure visits. However, the project's main focus is clearly on women, given their marginalised status and heavy work burdens. The weakness in adequately attending to men may lie in part in how the project understands and operationalises the term 'gender'. A common misapprehension among lay people and development workers alike is that gender refers to women, rather than women and men in relationship to one another. In addition, the impression was that staff understood gender as being about roles – what women and men do – rather than about relationships and power, and about the fundamentally asymmetrical relations of power associated with women's unequal access to resources. A more nuanced understanding of gender that acknowledges

how these asymmetries translate into diminished social and economic status and reduced life options is necessary if the project is serious about addressing gender strategic concerns and needs. These, by definition, go to the heart of a range of imbalances that exist between women and men in terms of access to and control over assets, resources (both tangible and intangible), decision making, and the cultural entitlements of each.

Two other issues emerge out of a relational understanding of gender: i) neither men nor women constitute a homogenous group because various factors (including caste, socioeconomic status, age, and ability) create multiple levels of privilege and marginality within, as much as across, gender; and ii) different categories of women (young/old, daughters-in-law/mothers-in-law, higher/lower caste, and so on) have different priorities, needs, abilities, and constraints. Bringing an understanding of both of these to the level of project implementation might help staff in devising ways to address practical needs and identify strategic concerns. This would also facilitate articulating strategies and starting points that are more appropriate to addressing situations as they arise.

The difference between 'women's needs' versus a 'gender perspective' – as well as underscoring the distinction between practical and strategic issues – is best illustrated by looking at the issue of women's health needs and concerns. The health modules are being used to considerable effect to teach women about the basics of needing to keep water and foodstuffs clean, healthy eating, the importance of vaccinating children, and so forth. All of this is vital information that, at present, can and does exclude men because it is women who are responsible for the preparation of food and the care of children. A gendered approach, by contrast, would situate the discussion within the context of those social and familial parameters within which women are operating and take into account the fact that they do not have control over their bodies, fertility, or reproductive choices. Such an approach, which Aajeevika is a long way from being competent to address, would necessitate bringing up issues of power, decision making, responsibility, and ultimately men's and women's relationships with and to one another.

### **Gender sensitivity of the project team**

There was little evidence that the project's partners have been able to bring a gender sensitive perspective into their organisational structures. It was also striking that there are at present no women at the senior levels of the project team, and the mainly very young women who are employed hold either low-level office or group promoter (field) positions. Our discussions focused on how hard it is to attract women as group promoters because of the demanding nature of the work, which entails walking considerable distances in remote areas through jungles (in a social context in which it isn't 'done' to have a woman wandering about on her own). Educated girls (or their families) are reluctant to take on such jobs.

Another big issue is the high staff turnover. This affects a sense of continuity in the work and results in time being lost in repeated orientations and trainings. One reason for this is that women leave to get married or, because they are educated, are able to find better employment with the government.

Whilst there is a tremendous willingness to address gender issues, the capacity to do so is limited. All the male staff met agreed that gender is not a well-understood concept and that there is a tremendous need for more sensitisation trainings and capacity building initiatives for both staff and villagers.

### **Conclusions**

A number of dimensions of Aajeevika's work are going well: i) the self help groups are having an impact on the lives of members; ii) drudgery reduction interventions are reducing many of the more time-consuming aspects of women's daily work routines; iii) project personnel at all levels are hard working and enthusiastic; iv) convergence with government and non-government organisations is providing innovative ways of pooling resources and, more importantly, helping to work on issues that, whilst not immediately pertinent to the project's mandate, are now emerging as 'second generation' concerns; and, finally, (v) Aajeevika has good visibility and is well-regarded.

Aajeevika's interventions in women's group formation and drudgery reduction activities are making an impact in addressing women's practical concerns.

Is this women-focused approach working? Yes, to the extent that it is beginning to make a difference in numerous very concrete aspects of many women's lives. Continued efforts in documenting women-hours saved through drudgery-reduction interventions and a better understanding of the actual reduction in loads and weights is very important. It is also necessary to see how women are using the time that has ostensibly been 'freed up'. There is anecdotal evidence that women are using the time saved in looking after their children and devoting more time to themselves, but this needs further elaboration.

There is evidence that, as a result of project work, changes in attitudes and behaviours are occurring. SHG members are taking a more active role in panchayati raj (local government) institutions, with a number of them even taking on the mantle of headship; the idea of 'pradhan pati' (the widespread phenomenon of a woman leader's husband being the one who actually wields the power) is eroding; and there are areas where SHGs are drawing on men's support for forest protection and anti-liquor activities.

In terms of strengthening gender mainstreaming work, several approaches need to be considered:

- Giving group promoters, who are the project's real foot soldiers, greater input in shaping what they do and how they do it, as well as being able to provide feedback at the block and district management unit levels
- Providing more quality and relevant capacity building to staff (whilst at the same time being attentive to people's absorption capacities) – at all levels staff are enthusiastic about wanting to engage with what they understand to be gender issues, but they aren't adequately equipped with the conceptual know-how to engage effectively at the field level
- Identifying potential village-level leaders, both women and men
- Developing a cadre of trainers-of-trainers

On the question of how the gender approach promoted by IFAD is genuinely mainstreamed into Aajeevika and its partner organisations, much work remains to be done.

At this half-way point, the extent to which Aajeevika can be said to be a gender mainstreamed project is arguable. According to IFAD's Gender Mainstreaming Action Plan (2003-2006), mainstreaming gender is a process by which a gender perspective is institutionalised in the policies, programmes, and projects and which finds expression in the organisational culture. Based on these points, and in comparison with the experience of gender mainstreaming processes in other organisations, a number of key things are not in place. Paramount among these is the existence of an enabling environment, which entails commitment to gender equality to be woven into the organisation's mandate, leadership, structures, and programmes, as well as financial support for gender mainstreaming and gender issues. It also entails a working environment in which staff of both genders feel comfortable airing experiences, grievances, and problems, and are optimistic that their voices will be heard.

Notwithstanding the fact that the Project Director is a woman, there is a continued lack of qualified senior female staff in Aajeevika. This is cause for concern: a project working on women's empowerment must show that it is 'walking the talk' in a meaningful way. One significant way to do this is through the presence of senior female staff who serve as powerful role models both for junior staff and villagers. A meaningful translation from the rhetoric of commitment to working with gender demands that staff examine their own lives and the persistent hierarchies within the workplace; this has not occurred as yet. Much more work needs to be done to give all staff – even those whose work is office-based and ostensibly not 'engaged' in gender issues – a well-grounded understanding of and sensitivity to gender issues.

Some possible remedies include

- holding an organisation-wide gender mainstreaming and organisational change training under the aegis of an external facilitator;
- identifying gender resource organisations and individuals who are familiar with the area and have a background in working with gender and social issues, and who can provide in-house training as needed; and
- brainstorming (also at different levels within the organisation) on how to address gender and other hierarchical stumbling blocks. (The 'culture' argument that continues to be expressed is not viable as, all over the country, projects are finding ways to rise above discriminatory and oppressive conditions).

Extract from: Manjari, M (2008) *Gender Assessment of Uttarakhand Livelihoods Improvement Project in the Himalayas*, a report submitted to ICMOD, Kathmandu, Nepal (unpublished)



# Annex 3: Gender Assessment of the North Eastern Region Community Resource Management Project for Upland Areas and the Meghalaya Livelihoods Improvement Project for the Himalayas

Madhu Sarin, 2008

## Introduction

In 2008, a gender assessment was conducted of two IFAD supported projects in North East India: the North Eastern Region Community Resource Management Project for Upland Areas (NERCORMP), which began in May 1999 and ended in March 2008, and the Meghalaya Livelihoods Improvement Project for the Himalayas (MLIPH), which became operational in 2004 and is scheduled to run for eight years.

The aim of the gender assessment was to examine how IFAD's Gender Mainstreaming Action Plan is reflected in the strategies of the two projects, and the impacts of these strategies at the grassroots and policy levels. The assessment involved interviews with project team members, project partners, and members of the natural resources management groups (NARMGs) and self help groups (SHGs) supported by the projects, as well as a review of project documents.

## Gender Issues Prior to Project Implementation

India's hilly North East region is rich in cultural and ethnic diversity, with strong surviving traditional institutions. Shifting cultivation, known locally as 'jhum', is the predominant agricultural system in the upland areas, and women are the major actors. The main tribes in the project areas are matrilineal: the Khasi, Jaintia, and Garo tribes of Meghalaya, and the Tiwa tribe in Karbi Anglong. The other major ethnic groups in the project districts are patrilineal.

Despite being a matrilineal society, Meghalaya lags behind other North Eastern states in several social indicators. A matrilineal structure does not necessarily equate to a superior status for women, as the management of property is still controlled by male relatives, chiefly the maternal uncle. Equally, within the matrilineal structure, women play the central role as the embodiment of the clan. Given their culturally important reproductive role, their rights over ancestral property and domestic space, relative freedom related to marriage, divorce, and remarriage, and active involvement in the production process, the status of women in matrilineal societies does not conform to the typical subordinate position of women in patriarchal structures. However, with larger socioeconomic transformations in the region promoting a social milieu fostering patriarchal values, gender relations are becoming more dominated by men. Although women continue to be the owners and custodians of ancestral family property, ways have been devised to convert land into private property in the name of men. Even among patrilineal societies, despite women not owning property, communal values and culturally assured access to clan land for jhum cultivation provides a certain level of livelihood security for women, which is not found in mainstream Indian society. The increasing privatisation of clan land and the drive to replace jhum with settled cultivation is progressively weakening communal values integral to jhum cultivation. Gender relations in the area are undergoing transformations in a manner that is poorly understood due to the region's unique cultural traditions.

Despite their disproportionate share of the workload, women's role in decision making is minimal in both matrilineal and patrilineal societies. Although both men and women face problems of poverty, women face additional problems in terms of much longer working hours and because of their specific health issues. Women in the project areas do not have problems in relation to dowry, but suffer from high incidences of divorce, early marriage, spouse alcoholism, and unemployment.

In practically every village visited in Meghalaya, in Karbi Anglong district in Assam, and Senapati district in Manipur, women talked of isolated and difficult lives prior to NERCORMP and MLIPH. There was little space for women to get together or interact with outsiders, and they had little access to information. Women had virtually no access to government departments or banks, or information about government schemes and programmes for women. There were no sanitation facilities in the villages, inadequate road connectivity, poor health and education facilities, and limited access to safe drinking water. If women sold any produce, they did so individually and in the local market. With a predominantly subsistence economy, there was limited cash income available at the household level to take care of other needs.

While men also encounter most of these problems, the major additional constraint faced by women was their traditional exclusion from community decision-making bodies. This applied equally to women from matrilineal and patrilineal communities. In Karbi Anglong and Senapati districts, women said that, prior to NERCORMP, men often did not permit them to go out or interact with outsiders.

Although many villages have primary health centres, they are empty buildings with no staff or facilities. There is a high rate of maternal mortality. One comes across many grandmothers bringing up the children of their daughters who died during childbirth. Women would like to increase the spacing between children, but have little knowledge of reproductive health and birth control. Because of women's lack of exposure to the outside world, and most government departments organising village meetings through male dominated institutions that only invite men, it is predominantly men who show up during initial village meetings and are quick to take advantage of project interventions. Particular effort was required to reach women through door-to-door visits and motivate them to attend village meetings. Concerned about the very limited participation of women in project activities during the early project period, MLIPH's gender and non-government organisations and community-based organisations (NGOs/CBOs) manager established a gender sensitisation team (GST) for more intensive, door-to-door visits to draw the women out and change men's attitudes. Motivating women to form self-help groups required several visits to gain their confidence.

By custom, poor women and men enjoy assured access to clan land for jhum cultivation, which remains the dominant livelihood system in most of the project areas. Most traditional institutions in almost all upland communities practising jhum ensure that women-headed households, particularly widows and divorced women, are allocated jhum land for their subsistence needs. Jhum cultivation is, thus, integrally linked to tribal social organisation and communal values, which have traditionally kept the region free from landlessness and outright destitution, particularly among women. However, the privatisation of communal land, accompanied by the persistent promotion of commercial horticultural and other crops, and settled cultivation to replace jhum, combined with rising land values near towns and along highways, has increased the vulnerability of the poor, especially of widows and divorced women.

## **Addressing Poverty in North East India**

### **North Eastern Region Community Resource Management Project for Upland Areas (NERCORMP)**

NERCORMP was designed against a background of economic stagnation and resultant chronic poverty caused by the inability of the traditional jhum system of shifting cultivation to cope with increasing population and decreasing fertility, and the consequent threat to the environment and biodiversity. The primary thrust of the project was to demonstrate a new approach to development that would be technically appropriate, culturally sensitive, and institutionally effective. Specific emphasis was placed on the empowerment of women; water catchment integrity; and pro-poor, differential benefit entitlement, to support traditional tribal poverty alleviation customs and practices. The goal of NERCORMP was to improve the livelihoods of vulnerable groups in a sustainable manner through improved management of their natural resource base, which would restore and protect the environment. Modification or adaptation of the system of jhum cultivation, so as to increase productivity, prevent land degradation, and conserve biodiversity and the environment, was a major focus of the project.

Key elements of the project strategy were to inculcate the participation of communities in the formulation of community resource management plans and in the diversification of livelihood systems; build their village and local organisations into capable agencies for development planning and implementation; change the attitudes and behaviour of the key actors in regional and local development (namely line agency staff, NGOs, supporting institutions, and service providers, including

the private sector) notably for extension, marketing, and credit; and arrange and fund the necessary training, orientation, and experiential learning activities to underpin the expected transformation.

Jhum cultivation is largely controlled by women and the project promoted transformations of jhum required monitoring to ensure that they did not negatively impact on women's existing access to and control over the fundamental assets provided by jhum.

### **Meghalaya Livelihoods Improvement Project for the Himalayas (MLIPH)**

The MLIPH project started in 2004 and is working in five of the most remote and underdeveloped districts of Meghalaya targeting the section of the population just above or below the poverty line.

The project's primary objective is to improve the livelihoods of vulnerable households in an equitable and sustainable manner through the promotion of improved livelihood opportunities and by strengthening local institutions that relate to livelihood development.

The project has adopted a twin track implementation mechanism consisting of a project management structure responsible for all fund flow arrangements and capacity building activities, and a social venture capital company (SVCC) responsible for all enterprise and business development activities. The SVCC is expected to facilitate linkages of women, men, and their organisations with different financial institutions and to become self-sustaining by the end of the project.

The project design views the livelihoods of the targeted poor women and men as 'enterprises' to be supported by business development services. It aims to facilitate poor households to overcome the constraints they face due to their almost total dependence on the subsistence sector by promoting enterprise development among them and linking them to markets.

The project strategy for mainstreaming gender provides for i) reducing women's drudgery with improved technologies; ii) the gender sensitisation of men; iii) ensuring good representation of women in project management units (PMUs), NGOs, and CBOs; iv) intensive training on gender perspective building in the initial phase of the project targeting the PMU, district project monitoring committees, NGOs and institutional partners, government departments, identified communities, and community leaders; and v) building gender concerns into all economic, institutional, and livelihood capacity development programmes.

## **Addressing Gender Issues**

### **Women's participation in local institutions and community decision making**

NERCORMP's institutional interventions at the community level have been central to creating space for women to participate and in empowering women. For the first time, an institutional platform for women to participate in community-level decision making has been created by generating social pressure on village men and traditional leaders to accept one man and one woman from each household as members of the natural resources management groups (NARMG). With NARMGs preparing their own village natural resource management plans, a mechanism for bottom up planning was created at the community level that has facilitated the identification of need-based activities and interventions in which women have also gained a voice for the first time.

NERCORMP's strategy of nesting women's self help groups (SHGs) within all village NARMGs has been very successful in addressing many of the practical needs of women and men, and also in initiating a process of transforming gender relations in the project areas. Capacity building has covered the organisation of SHGs and their federations, technical training for a wide range of farm and non-farm livelihood activities, financial management, health and sanitation education, and awareness about government programmes and legal rights, as well as reinforcing communal values such as supporting the weakest and addressing social problems like alcoholism and domestic violence.

At the time of the gender assessment, MLIPH's strategy was to focus on creating and supporting the women's self help groups. The project was not supporting the formation of community-based organisations such as NARMGs. The SHG scheme has been successful in building women's economic empowerment and self-reliance. However, the weakness of this approach

is the absence of linkages with community decision-making bodies and the fact that it tends to isolate women instead of integrating them into the management of communal assets and decisions on the development of their community.

Training in account keeping for their savings and credit schemes by both projects has motivated women to at least learn to sign their names. Combined with women's increased incomes, this has been instrumental in motivating parents to ensure that girls receive post primary education and that the overall school dropout rate declines substantially.

The further organisation of SHGs into cluster level and apex federations in both project areas has dramatically increased women's self-confidence and ability to interact with government officials, banks, and traders for marketing. In Hamren in Karbi Anglong district, it was reported that a woman could seldom be seen in a bank before the project; the local bank is now an enthusiastic supporter of SHGs. Besides starting their own bank (the Banking Institution for Learning Centre of Holistic Aspirations of Mothers – BILCHAM) in the West Garo Hills, the SHG federations have taken up a large number of new and innovative economic enterprises. The solid capacity building of SHGs in account keeping and extensive exposure visits and training organised for village women and men has been critical in achieving the project outcomes.

### **Increasing women's control over fundamental assets**

NERCORMP has facilitated improved access and control over resources for both women and men in many ways. During the pre-project period, traditional village institutions and village women and men did not have much access to funds from government programmes for rural development. The poor functioning of government departments left them deprived of basic infrastructure and welfare services. Project funds for income generation activities made available to NARMGs and SHGs predominantly enabled village women to gain access to land resources for home gardens, herbal gardens, SHG vegetable gardens, and so forth, based on their priorities as reflected in their village development plans. This was supplemented by facilitating access to funds from several government programmes through convergence.

There has been a marked improvement in basic infrastructure, such as roads, safe drinking water sources, community halls and facilities, and the availability of welfare services in villages in NERCORMP project areas. (It was not possible to assess this type of change under the MLIPH as at the time of assessment; the project had only been running for a few years.) Through the organisation and capacity building of women's SHGs, women have developed the habit of saving and learned to manage and keep accounts. They are now accessing loans from banks and private institutions through the SHGs, as well as implementing government programmes through convergence. Many SHGs and their federations now own vehicles, shops, paddy milling machines, and other assets. A large number of women have set up their own farms and non-farm based enterprises. These include goat-keeping, piggeries, poultry farms, tailoring units, and shops. Women have used the income earned from small initial units to scale up or start new enterprises.

Particularly in Meghalaya, and to some extent in the Karbi Anglong Hills, the NARMGs have been successful in having village forests registered in their name. This has increased village control over the management of forests and non-timber forest products (NTFPs). In some cases, better-protected village forests have resulted in a reduction in the burden on women in relation to collecting firewood.

Similarly, many women's SHGs have been allotted land for herbal and vegetable gardens or other activities by the traditional village authorities. In some of the Kuki villages in Senapati district in Manipur, where the village head owns all village land, the project has facilitated the secure allocation of 453 hectares of land to the NARMGs of different villages. In the West Khasi Hills in Meghalaya, where an important portion of the land has been privatised, many poor women and men have had some clan land allocated to them by the village headmen through social pressure. Some women are also reportedly purchasing land with their new savings and incomes.

Previously, 90 per cent of households were in thrall to exploitative moneylenders who gave loans at 10 per cent interest per month (120% per year). With women starting savings and credit schemes through SHGs, together with the availability of funds for income generation activities (IGA) from the project, the moneylenders have been largely pushed aside and there has been a considerable increase in women's income. The SHGs can borrow from their federation at 2 per cent per month and lend to their members at 3 per cent per month.

The economic/livelihood interventions have included both farm and non-farm initiatives. In the farming sector, as a part of the project's objective to modify jhum cultivation to ensure its sustainability, one of the most significant interventions has been the promotion of home gardens. These were absent or rudimentary in most project areas at the start of the project; post project, home gardens represent the most significant farm diversification and have supported many women-led enterprises. The promotion of home gardens had a two-pronged objective: to reduce dependence on and improve the management of shifting cultivation, and to provide women with access to productive land in the vicinity of their homes for improved nutrition and income while also reducing their jhum workload.

The cultivation of local as well as new crops for market in home gardens and jhum fields with the help of investment funds has increased women's incomes. There are many local crops, such as king chilli, tree tomatoes, ginger, and potatoes, that were previously grown only for home consumption and that women have now been able to scale up for sale.

In addition, there has been fairly large-scale promotion of commercial horticultural and other plantations on jhum fallow lands. These include banana, areca nut, patchauli, aloe vera, tea, pineapple, and broom grass. This has been supplemented by SHGs giving women loans for small livestock rearing such as poultry, goats, and pigs. The non-farm livelihood interventions have included setting up tailoring units, shops, and producing other local products. Several collective enterprises have been created to add value to the produce from these activities, either through the NARMG associations or the SHG federations. These collective enterprises have used the cluster approach of promoting one or two specific crops in a cluster of villages to make collective marketing viable. Many successful marketing linkages have also been developed for the new products from the area. Thus, a tea factory has been established in the Garo Hills by the West Garo Hills Tea Farmers federation, whose membership is about 25 to 30 per cent women. Rice mills built in many villages by women's SHGs or federations have saved women the drudgery of manual grinding.

Overall, the area under shifting cultivation has been reduced by nearly half; terraced and irrigated lands have been expanded and improved; diversified farming systems focusing on horticulture and tree crops have been widely adopted; and measures have been taken to protect forests, watersheds, wildlife, and biodiversity. The project has also succeeded in the progressive commercialisation of small subsistence farms by encouraging participation in savings and credit schemes, the diversification of farm enterprises, and private sector linkages. However, the gender implications of these transformations for long-term changes in women's access and control over productive assets, as well as household food and livelihood security, have not been monitored and remain unclear.

Convergence with government departments to enable women to access social welfare and infrastructure development benefits from existing government schemes has been very successful in Meghalaya, but more difficult in Assam.

### **Alleviating women's drudgery**

Alleviating women's workload was an important objective of NERCORMP. Several activities were conducted for this purpose based on women's priorities as identified during the participatory preparation of village development plans or by women's SHGs. These included

- developing safe drinking water sources and water reservoirs within or near villages to save women long hours spent fetching water from distant sources;
- constructing roads, footpaths, and culverts for improved connectivity and market access;
- setting up rice mills by SHGs to save women the daily drudgery of manually husking rice;
- constructing low cost latrines to provide women with privacy while improving overall health and sanitation in the villages;
- the declaration of 4973 acres as community forest to protect water catchments, improve the availability of firewood, conserve biodiversity, and so forth; and
- constructing school buildings and the organising health awareness programmes to improve health and educational facilities in the villages in convergence with other government departments.

### **Changes in gender relations and women's empowerment**

At the recommendation of the Gender and NGOs/CBOs Manager, NERCORMP constituted a Gender Sensitisation Team (GST) of four women and one man to conduct intensive gender sensitisation of village women and men. The team was trained and has initiated intensive village visits for training and the dissemination of information to increase women's



participation, as well as to train District Management Unit staff. The GST also informs villagers about government schemes and their rights and entitlements, such as their right to food and right to information.

In the older NERCORMP villages, significant changes in gender relations are evident, both within the household and at the community level. With the organisation of women into SHGs, higher-level clusters, and apex SHG federations, women have gained space and the opportunity to regularly meet and interact with other women. Because they have to be away from the home for meetings and other activities, their normal household chores are increasingly being shared by the men. With women becoming more vocal and empowered, their views have started being respected by the village authorities. It has become easier to organise village level activities. Village after village, women reported that, prior to the project, they could not even talk to their fellow male villagers, but now they feel confident and capacitated to talk to men in the district administration, as well as to male traders and bank officials. Collectively, they have even tried to fight alcoholism and domestic violence. In Umswai village in Karbi Anglong, the SHG federation members now check the quality of products being sold by traders in the local market to ensure that they are not selling expired medicines and that the dried fish on sale is of good quality.

## Impacts on Project Partners

Although NERCORMP has successfully facilitated convergence with several government departments, it seems unlikely that there has been much gender sensitisation of their staff. The project's partners did not seem to have a good understanding of the gender dimension of their interventions.

In the West Garo Hills, much of the training imparted by the Horticulture Department was conducted in Tura town, where few women could attend. Consequently, men received most of the training.

Another concern related to convergence with government departments is that they often have predetermined schemes that are not gender sensitive. This leads to the project accepting such schemes instead of being able to reshape them in line with the project's own objectives. The fairly large-scale adoption of commercial plantations seems to fall into this category. These may have an adverse impact on women's strategic gender needs in the long-term through reducing their control over agricultural production for the household and the local market.

## Constraints and Emerging Issues

### Traditional dominance of men

Deep-rooted cultural values and beliefs continue to constrain the acceptance of women in traditional village institutions, where decisions with potentially far reaching impacts on women continue to be taken.

The male Naga leaders of Maran Khullen village in Senapati district still do not permit women to participate in the meetings of their traditional institution. Their justification is that, sometimes, secret strategies for dealing with conflict with other villages are discussed by the men during such meetings. Since married women come from other villages, their loyalty cannot be trusted for security reasons.

In Ganol village in the West Garo Hills, during a meeting with men, the Nokma (traditional village head) said that, if commercial plantations make the villagers well off, they will stop jhumming altogether. Their NARMG is setting up a factory for processing aloe vera and many households have undertaken tea plantation on 'akhing' (village) land. The men said that women do most of the work on jhum, know more about food crops and horticulture, decide which crops to plant, which seeds to save, and when to harvest. Even the planting of commercial crops like ginger in the jhum fields is decided on and controlled by women. However, decisions about commercial plantations are taken primarily by men. When asked whether they had sought women's views about the potential impact on household nutrition and food security if all jhum was replaced by commercial plantations, they just laughed. Switching totally from jhum to commercial plantations will effectively replace a production system controlled by women with one controlled by men. Due to women's continuing exclusion from all such male forums, despite their empowerment through SHGs, men retain the power to take fundamental decisions that could affect nutrition and food security and deprive women of their traditional control over jhum cultivation.

## Shifts in agricultural practices and impacts on women

Based on the traditional gender division of labour in agriculture, it could be argued that agriculture in the project areas is fairly feminised. A matter of concern is whether the new activities promoted by the projects have increased women's workload, although reducing their drudgery. Most of the work in jhum cultivation is done by women. In Ganol village in the West Garo Hills, for every two days of work men put into jhum, women put in seven. Detailed exploration of the division of labour between men and women in jhum during different months of the year in Mikilsingre village in the East Garo Hills again indicated that women do far more work than men. If the household men need to go out to earn wages when the land has to be cleared for jhum, then even the cutting of trees and land clearance is done by women.

In all three activities (jhum, home gardens, and commercial plantations), women continue to carry a disproportionate burden in terms of labour. A related issue here is the gender implications of cash crop promotion – men seem to be monopolising control over cash crops and income from them, while women are left with jhum and the additional burden of labour for the cash crops. Commodification in jhum, particularly of ginger, depends largely on women's labour for management. But it is unclear who controls the cash returns.

The fact that such critical issues have not been addressed indicates the absence of gender sensitivity in the project teams and partners. Specific activities are conducted to address some of the 'traditional' problems faced by women, but the projects and partners have failed to acknowledge women's real and central role in jhum cultivation. This has led to the promotion of activities 'for men' supposedly for the benefit of the household, without taking into account the consequences on women's workload and reduced access to and control over fundamental assets.

In view of the above, it needs to be examined whether, despite all the livelihood security and income benefits provided by project activities, the projects may also have contributed towards the further feminisation of an already feminised cultivation system.

## Tenure and land registration

The appraisal documents of both projects dwelt on the complexity of land tenure systems in the project areas and the need to find mechanisms to increase tenurial security for women and the poor while curtailing the increasing privatisation of clan lands. NERCORMP has done considerable innovative work on increasing tenurial security for groups and individual women and men, and MLIPH is adopting a land banking approach with similar objectives. However, the gender implications of the privatisation of jhum fallow lands through the promotion of commercial plantations, largely led by men, has escaped the attention it deserves. Given traditional gender relations in the area, if men are motivated to take up commercial plantation, women fall in line. The critical questions are who will gain from and control the income from such plantations, and what will be their impact on the jhum production system, which is largely controlled by women? These questions do not seem to have been raised by the projects. Commercial plantations seem to be replacing jhum production, which is centred on household food security controlled by women, with production for the market controlled by men.

The distinction between tenure, comprising access to use rights, and ownership of land also needs to be recognised. Tenurial access to jhum land for the poorest women and men is one of the strongest pillars of the shifting cultivation system, which provides them with basic food security. When asked how the village head allocates jhum land to different families, the response in practically all villages was that widowed and abandoned women are given priority. The land is then parcelled out between different households on a first-come-first-served basis to avoid conflict, partly due to the belief that conflict results in a poor harvest.

A related concern is the growing trend of formal registration and private title over land brought under commercial plantation or near urban areas, particularly in the West Garo Hills. In the West Garo Hills, a lot of formal land registration seems to be taking place, but it was unclear whether the land was being registered in the name of women, as required under the matrilineal system, or whether some way had been devised of getting land registered in men's names. By custom, women in Meghalaya are the owners/custodians of the land, with their maternal uncles or husbands managing it on their behalf. The Autonomous District Council (ADC) is meant to register land only in women's names, but there were indications that ambiguities within the existing regulations were facilitating the registration of land in men's names leading to the dispossession of women through sale of such land. For example, although the District Commissioner and senior project staff stated that

all land registration is only done by the ADC and only in women's names, a separate meeting with men in Tapra Alda village indicated that paddy lands were being registered in men's names by a process that bypasses the ADC. It was not clear how this is done, but, if it is happening, it would amount to dispossessing women of their traditional ownership of the most valuable land resource. The conversion of jhum fallow land into commercial plantations by the project is also likely to generate pressure for registration due to the higher market value. That could result in double negative impacts for women – poor women would lose access to that land for jhum and the control over it would be transferred to the man of the household. It needs to be examined whether the constitutional provision of Schedule VI protecting the traditional custom of matrilineal system and land registration in the women's name is being flouted with the help of a legal ambiguity that the elite may have found.

There is a clear need to give more attention to the tenurial changes taking place in view of their long-term implications for women's access to and control over fundamental assets. For this, all project staff need to be better informed about constitutional, legal, and policy provisions protecting women's and community rights. They should also be sensitised to the importance of monitoring such changes so that remedial action can be taken if such provisions are flouted.

Overall, the projects have failed to recognise the potentially negative impacts of the agricultural transformations that they have promoted on women's ownership of and access to land resources.

### **Working with women only**

The MLIPH project design had a few shortcomings. Working only with SHGs, with a focus primarily on forming women's SHGs, proved to be a handicap as the approach makes it difficult to engage the entire community in the project. Some of the project team were aware that working primarily with women's SHGs not nested within an all village organisation could result not only in increasing women's work burden, but also in isolating them from other programmes being implemented in the village. The headmen of some villages felt that there was no need to involve SHG members in the government-funded projects they were implementing because the SHGs were already receiving support from the project.

### **Capacity of the project staff**

Both projects have benefited from having committed and competent project staff teams at the project management and district levels, which have been provided with extensive capacity building support and training. However, gender sensitisation training, especially at the senior levels, seemed to be weak.

MLIPH does have a gender strategy. It aims to (i) ensure that women are well represented in various PMUs, NGOs, and grassroots institutions; (ii) conduct a series of intensive trainings on gender perspective building in the initial phase of the project targeting the PMU, the District Project Management Team, NGOs and institutional partners, government departments, selected communities, and community leadership; and (iii) build gender concerns into all economic and institutional capacity development aspects of the project, as well as in livelihood training and capacity development activities. In addition, it requires the collection of baseline data and a gender analysis of the target area to enable the project to develop a needs-based strategy for mainstreaming gender. The baseline data was also supposed to be used as a monitoring and evaluation tool to measure progress in this regard during the course of the project. However, the questionnaire developed by the PMU for baseline data collection, which has since been analysed, has practically no provision for gender disaggregated data. No information has been gathered about the gender division of labour, women's role in and control over crops and other production/income, women's ownership and control over land, or their specific problems and priorities. The only questions under the title of 'women's issues', which were to be asked only to women, primarily related to water, fodder, and firewood collection. Data gathered according to the questionnaire will not provide the gender-related baseline information the project requires.

Under NERCORMP and MLIPH, gender concerns seem to have been treated as the responsibility only of the concerned manager or institutional development officers, and primarily targeted at NGOs, CBOs, and villagers. If the concerned staff member leaves, it is difficult for other team members to pick up the threads. All three of the district unit managers interviewed either said they had little understanding of gender or equated it with the budgeted component for drudgery reduction.

This points to the issue of the gender sensitivity of top management and the importance of mainstreaming gender in the organisational culture. Although the appraisal report of MLIPH provides for the gender sensitisation of all project staff, the top leadership of both projects did not appear to have been through the process; a problem common to most development projects. An effective strategy needs to be developed to ensure the gender sensitisation of senior management, institutionalise gender in the organisation as a whole, and create an enabling environment for women staff, particularly those working in remote areas.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

NERCORMP has had an exemplary impact on expanding the role and influence of women in the indigenous communities and uplifting their status. Its strategy of providing women's agency through the promotion of SHGs nested within NARMGs created space for women to gain access to community level decision-making forums from which they have traditionally been excluded. The SHGs have empowered women with the skills and confidence to initiate a wide range of farm and non-farm enterprises. The project's support for infrastructure development in villages has significantly reduced their gendered workload of fetching water, manually pounding rice, and, to a lesser extent, collecting fuelwood. The promotion of home gardens has provided women with access to land near their homes through cultivation, which has greatly reduced the labour required to fetch daily requirements of vegetables and other food crops from distant jhum fields. Women have started earning higher incomes from both farm and non-farm enterprises, which has enabled them to provide better schooling to their children and take better care of other household needs. Their exposure to and interaction with the outside world has increased greatly and the SHG federations together with NARMG associations are becoming effective lobby groups and channels for accessing their legitimate entitlements from government agencies. There are initial flickers of change in gender relations in the project areas, with men beginning to share the domestic work and respect women's newly acquired skills and knowledge.

However, many of the changes promoted by the project in the jhum cultivation system, traditionally controlled by women, may impact negatively in the long term on women's pre-existing access to and control over fundamental assets due to the absence of a gender mainstreaming approach in the transformations promoted by the project. The project aimed to transform shifting cultivation through the rationalisation and optimisation of land utilisation by promoting a switch to more productive cash crops whilst ensuring a minimal level of home food production. However, recognising that jhum cultivation is generally controlled by women, the impact of the change on women's access to and control over jhum was to be carefully monitored. A study of the gender organisation of production systems was to be commissioned to enable such monitoring. Not only was the study not undertaken, but no monitoring of the impact of introduced changes on women's access and control over jhum has been done.

The apparent trend is of women controlled jhum lands, which provide diverse food crops for household food and nutritional security spread over most months of the year, being increasingly converted into cash crop plantations controlled by men, the cash income from which is likely to remain male controlled. The conversion of jhum fallows into commercial plantations seems to be replacing women's control over jhum production centred on household food security with production for the market controlled by men.

Critical questions are: Who will benefit from and control the income from such plantations? And what will be the impact of plantations (and their effective privatisation) on the common proprietorship of jhum lands, which have traditionally ensured access for the poorest women and men?

### Protecting tenurial security for women and the poor

To protect women and the poor, the projects must adopt a framework for land use change that ensures the protection of jhum land and provides associated tenurial security for women and the poor. In the absence of a coherent community defined framework for land use changes, the unregulated promotion/adoption of commercial plantations may result in some NERCORMP villages being left with no land for jhumming in the near future. This could lead to poor women and men permanently losing access to jhum land due to all of it being privatised through commercial plantations. None of the NERCORMP villages visited had openly deliberated on whether they consciously wanted to dispense with jhum altogether, yet some seemed to be heading in that direction.

NERCORMP and MLIPH should facilitate the development of a holistic framework by village women and men for permissible land use changes in their villages that ensures the maintenance of a balance between land reserved for jhum cultivation, with all its associated benefits of community proprietorship and assured access to the poorest women and men, and land which can be diverted for commercial crops and horticultural plantations. Discussions need to be facilitated, particularly with village women, to enable communities to reflect on the implications of the total cessation of jhum. A monitoring protocol to keep track of land use changes at the landscape level should be developed to ensure that women do not end up losing their customary access to and control over such lands. Women controlled commodification of organic jhum vegetables that have a niche market in urban areas could enable women to retain control over income while also protecting the area's rich agrobiodiversity and women's knowledge of it.

To protect the tenurial rights of women and the poor, the projects should

- adopt a framework for land use change that ensures the protection of jhum land and provides associated tenurial security for women and the poor; and
- develop a monitoring protocol to keep track of land use changes at the landscape level to ensure that women do not lose customary land use rights.

### **Mainstreaming gender**

NERCORMP's implementation has effectively focused on the women specific components and activities budgeted for in the project. Thus, NERCORMP has a large number of successful drudgery reduction and enterprise promotion activities to its credit. MLIPH has a similar approach. Although the projects have promoted women's increased access to and control over income through several interventions, the less visible, but more critical objective of ensuring that project interventions do not contribute to potentially reducing women's access to and control over land resources has escaped attention. There is also a need to mainstream and institutionalise gender in the organisational culture and in the functioning of the project management unit and district management units.

To mainstream gender, the projects should undertake the following:

- Give priority to institutionalising gender sensitivity in the organisational culture and ensure that staff at all levels as well as project partners gain a better understanding of the meaning of gender mainstreaming; terms of reference should be developed for each member of the project management unit and district management units to achieve the gender equity objective and ensure accountability at all levels
- Develop effective protocols for monitoring the gender impacts of all their interventions
- Consider redoing the baseline survey to integrate gender disaggregated data and gather necessary information to perform a gender analysis – notably a gender analysis of issues and potential impacts of project interventions
- Develop a gender policy and an enabling environment for female (and male) staff at all levels to facilitate the recruitment of more women in these positions
- Ensure all staff are well informed about the constitutional, legal, and policy provisions applicable in their respective areas so that they do not inadvertently violate the same
- Give higher priority to sensitising project partners – particularly government agencies – to gender mainstreaming in their specific fields to promote gender equity



# Acronyms and Abbreviations

ICIMOD	International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development
IFAD	International Fund for Agricultural Development
MAPs	medicinal and aromatic plants
MLIPH	Meghalaya Livelihoods Improvement Project for the Himalayas
NARMGs	natural resources management groups
NERCORMP	North Eastern Region Community Resource Management Project for Upland Areas
ULIPH	Uttarakhand Livelihoods Improvement Project in the Himalayas
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
WUPAP	Western Uplands Poverty Alleviation Project

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## Production team

A Beatrice Murray (Senior editor)  
Dharma R Maharjan (Layout and design)  
Asha Kaji Thaku (Editorial assistant)

**Photos:** Alex Treadway

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**International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development**

GPO Box 3226, Kathmandu, Nepal

**Tel** +977-1-5003222 **email** [info@icimod.org](mailto:info@icimod.org) **web** [www.icimod.org](http://www.icimod.org)

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