

Gender Experiences and Responses to Climate Change in the Himalayas



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FOR MOUNTAINS AND PEOPLE

Voices from the ground

For many women around the world, the benefits of an increasingly globalised world are elusive and seem to be out of reach. Women in the Hindu Kush-Himalayas (HKH) feel exclusion from globalisation, global environmental governance, and other global forces especially acutely, even if these forces have the potential to improve women's socio-economic and political status. One reason is that the region is home to some of the world's economically poorest people, a large proportion being women. Women's marginalisation is further exacerbated by other drivers of change such as climate change and gender relations of power that disadvantage them.

During the Women's World Congress held in Ottawa, Canada in July 2011, the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD) organised an interactive panel entitled 'Women's Experiences and Responses to Climate Change, Globalisation, and Processes of Gender Exclusion in the Himalayas' in which development practitioners from Bhutan, India, and Nepal shared their experiences, innovations, and learning from the region. They discussed and debated critical findings from research as well as action, with a particular emphasis on women's strategies for empowerment and for breaking new ground for gender-positive change. The panellists argued that innovation needs to begin with an understanding of mountain and culturally specific contexts (such as inaccessibility, fragility, marginality, and exclusion) and opportunities (such as environmental niches, diversity, and community-driven approaches). Above all, solutions must be based on the needs and aspirations of economically poor and socio-politically marginalised women and men, as well as on strong partnerships, policies, and action. The discussion was framed by five questions.

ICIMOD's Interactive Panel at the Women's World Congress

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What are the most critical problems facing mountain women, given mountain- and culturally specific constraints such as inaccessibility, environmental fragility, marginality, exclusion, and variability in the HKH?

Increased workloads and change in social status. In the mountain areas of India and Nepal, outmigration of men to urban areas and foreign countries for employment has shifted their responsibilities and work in agricultural production and natural resource management on to the shoulders of women, intensifying their workloads. For instance, in remote villages of mid-western Nepal, women spend around 14 hours per day in agriculture and household activities, while men spend only about 3 hours per day. This skewed gender division of labour has numerous impacts on women, including health implications (e.g., uterine prolapse, miscarriage).

Multiple domains of discrimination. Women in mountains suffer discrimination not only by gender, but also by caste, ethnicity, class, age, marital status, and other domains of difference. In India and Nepal, the overlapping of caste and patriarchal norms creates barriers for women, particularly in access to natural resources. For example, in Nepal, dalit women suffer from high incidence of poverty, low social status, and low formal literacy rates. Multiple forms of discrimination and marginalisation limit women's access to development resources, collective action, and their ability to manage natural resources sustainably.

Trafficking. When families face bleak livelihood options, children often fall prey to traffickers falsely promising better lives, education, and opportunities. These children, more commonly girls, are stripped of opportunities to attend school and lead normal lives, and are instead subject to sexual slavery and/or forced labour in urban centres in India, Nepal, and increasingly the Middle East. They are held against their will in inhumane conditions, suffering psychological trauma and in constant fear for their lives and wellbeing. Families are often not aware that their daughters are falling into the hands of traffickers. If girls survive the experience and return to their villages, they are often stigmatised and socially marginalised. They often suffer from HIV/AIDS, which further excludes them from development opportunities.

Inadequate access to and ownership of land and natural resources. Women invest significant amounts of their time and daily workload in collecting fodder and forage for livestock, leaf litter for manure, fuelwood for cooking, and non-timber forest products for food and medicine. They are also the primary care-givers of their families, often responsible for food production and the nutritional needs of the household. Yet, many women are themselves not food secure and suffer from malnutrition. Especially when men migrate, increased fallow land, limited organic manure and fodder, and decreased livestock numbers caused by inadequate availability of labour, together with women's lack of control over remittances, contribute to reductions in agricultural productivity, with serious implications for household food security.

What are women's experiences, and how are they negotiating the increasing interconnectedness yet paradoxical disconnectedness of a globalised world? What are some of the gendered processes of dispossession, disenfranchisement, and marginalisation resulting from globalisation pressures and other drivers of change?

Women's experiences in negotiating globalisation processes. Women often feel excluded and disconnected from the processes of globalisation, liberalisation of markets, and rapid changes in the environment and its

governance. In India, women have little voice or opportunity to participate in processes affecting the natural resources on which they rely – for instance, to negotiate with corporations constructing dams and tourist resorts that have severe impacts on the environment, including forests and water.

Disconnections in women's access to forest markets and resources. Women in mountain areas remain disconnected from forest markets and natural resource management (NRM) based economic activities; men tend to have more control over forest-based enterprises (including training, technology, and information). The emergence of new global environmental initiatives such as Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation plus (REDD+) provides new opportunities, but gender issues generally receive low priority in policy making and capacity development processes. Although India and Nepal are known for innovations in participatory forestry, the regulatory framework for forest management has yet to focus on ensuring economic and political opportunities for disadvantaged women.

Women's strategies and collective action. To cope with the effects of globalisation, exclusionary NRM markets, and gender-blind policy processes, women are negotiating with various political actors at different levels, employing multiple strategies. For example, in Bhutan, women are becoming aware of opportunities provided by markets and are making their businesses successful by obtaining non-formal education, sending children to school, taking an interest in decision-making processes, becoming aware of their own rights and responsibilities, and establishing non-governmental organisations (NGOs) such as the Tarayana Foundation and the Bhutan Association of Women Entrepreneurs. In India, women actively engage in self-help groups to manage and conserve natural resources. Some of these groups have spread all over India; an example is the Chipko movement, a non-violent forest protection and conservation movement started in the 1970s by Himalayan women in response to the unsustainable felling of trees by a contractor. Community-based NRM organisations and NGOs organised by women in Nepal include HIMAWANTI and W-LCN (Women Leading for Change





in Natural resources). In the regional context, organisations such as ICIMOD and Women Organizing for Change in Agriculture and Natural Resources (WOCAN) are working on advancing women's meaningful participation, capacities, and leadership skills in managing natural resources and are bringing gender issues to the agenda in policy dialogues.

How is climate change having an impact on the environment and especially women, and how are women strategising, adapting, innovating, and negotiating for gender-positive change from local to national contexts?

Climate change impacts on women. Women are disproportionately affected by climate-change related disasters such as floods, droughts, and landslides because of lack of access to information, mobility, decision-making power, access to resources, and capacity development, as well as socially constructed norms and barriers. Increased temperatures, erratic rainfall, and increased instances of drought, forest fires, and landslides have affected the composition, production, and availability of natural resources; as a result, women responsible for securing water, fuelwood, fodder, forage, and herbs for household and agricultural use are forced to cover greater distances and expend more time. This loss of time further limits women's participation in income generation, education, community leadership, and critically important social institutions. In Northern India, loss of habitat as a result of deforestation has also been observed to increase conflicts between wild animals and people, with most victims being women.

Women's adaptation strategies. In the middle hills of Nepal, women participate in promoting sustainable soil management by protecting farmyard manure from sun and water. They integrate legumes with cereal crops and are introducing cash cropping such as tomato production in small greenhouses. Women participate in various community-based NRM approaches for conserving forests, water springs, landslide affected areas, and biodiversity. The Federation of Community Forestry Users, Nepal

(FECOFUN), which ensures 50% participation of women in central, district, and village level executive committees, has been involved in the implementation of REDD+ pilot projects in collaboration with ICIMOD and the Asia Network for Sustainable Agriculture and Bioresources (ANSAB). Women in Bhutan use small farm machinery, sowing machines, oil expellers, rice and flour mills, small power tillers, improved and gender friendly farm tools (e.g. smaller sickle handles, lighter spades), solar home lighting systems, zero-energy storage chambers, mobile phones, and radios. Women in the region, as elsewhere in the world, actively engage in collective action efforts, organising themselves into cooperatives and self-help groups to address water, food insecurity, income generation, and nature conservation issues.

How are women excluded and marginalised from important decision and policy making institutions (both customary and statutory) and negotiations? Are there exceptions or innovations in the way women are responding?

Women's exclusion from policy processes. Women's representation in policy making processes – from the grassroots to national, regional, and international processes and institutions – is minimal in proportion to their contribution to sustaining the environment and natural resources. In India, even when women take part in local governance institutions (such as Panchayat Raj), they participate 'passively' because of social norms that restrain women from speaking actively or leading in public. The lack of women in governance institutions at the higher levels makes these systems gender blind as well as intimidating for women to deal with. In Bhutan, few women hold senior positions in politics and local government, although they have more decision-making power in the household and take part in all village-level meetings and decisions.

Innovations and breaking ground. Despite persistent gender exclusion, innovations are taking place in the HKH. The constitutions of India and Nepal provide for the inclusion of 33% representation of women in village political institutions (Panchayat Raj) and state institutions.

In Nepal, grassroots women have been included in the central advisory committee of the first Forest Carbon Trust Fund (FCTF) established by ICIMOD, FECOFUN, and ANSAB. This pilot REDD+ project engages 105 community forest user groups which include around 44,000 women. In Bhutan, community-based organisations working on women's and children's issues are coming together to ensure better awareness of rights and responsibilities as well as service delivery. Women in rural communities have joined self-help groups to improve their socioeconomic status themselves. Although a great deal of work remains to be done in enhancing women's leadership skills and knowledge to tackle gender-biased institutions and processes, by organising through self-help groups women have been able to secure economic benefits and to participate effectively in decision-making bodies at the local level.

Moving forward, what should research organisations, development agencies, government ministries, and local communities focus on to achieve real gender-positive change?

Alternative visions from the Himalayas. Governments, donors, development agencies, research organisations and communities managing natural resources can play critical roles in achieving gender-positive change in the HKH region. Countries need to learn from each other's practices, both positive and gender-blind. Much can be learned from Bhutan's 'gross national happiness' (GNH) concept, which envisions an alternative path to solely economic-led development, calling for balanced, people-centred development with the central goal of the happiness of the country's citizens. This approach offers potential to be progressive on gender issues.



The role of organisations, agencies, and communities.

As the biophysical perspective currently dominates NRM policy dialogues and practices, it is important to strengthen the capacities of policy and decision makers and development practitioners on gender issues within the fields of climate change, governance, land use, ecosystems, and development, and on the impact of gender issues on the environment and people's livelihoods. Government and development organisations might consider conscious moves to promote the substantive participation of women in policy and decision making and implementation, and the development and support of programmes that address the unique problems and vulnerabilities of Himalayan women. Policies concerning new drivers of change, including climate change and globalisation, must recognise gender issues and be explicit in gender integration strategies, including gender budgeting. Development agencies should support governments and other actors in developing and mobilising a critical mass of gender change agents – both women and men – in local, district, national, regional, and international arenas in order to help transform NRM institutions, programmes, and organisational cultures to be more gender inclusive, sensitive, and responsive. Importantly, gender-positive change and development outcomes require human and financial resources, as well as commitment from the very top. The needs of local women and men need to be at the heart of project and programme design. It is also important to strengthen women's inclusion in customary and statutory institutions, while strengthening women's leadership skills and technologies that reduce women's workloads.

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