

Transforming Women's Economic Power and Movements in Rural Development: Where Are We Now?

THREE DECADES
FOR MOUNTAINS AND PEOPLE



Voices from the ground

Many countries in the Hindu Kush Himalayas have seen significant gains in women's economic power but less progress in the implementation of economic and governance policies, allocation of resources, and the political will needed to make a real positive difference for rural women. Renewed attention to sustainable development and emerging global debates on the 'green economy' and climate change have tended to marginally focus on women's economic and social empowerment as central goals. In recent years, women's movements, groups, and organizations in mountain regions have also been experiencing fragmentation and resistance. At the same time, valuable solutions from mountain contexts offer hope, including community-based natural resource management and Bhutan's concept of Gross National Happiness, which focuses not only on economic, but also environmental, cultural, and social dimensions of development, and, most importantly, wellbeing.

During the 12th International AWID Forum held in Istanbul, Turkey 19-22 April 2012, the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD) organized an interactive panel. The panel brought together Dibya

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Gurung (Women Organizing for Change in Natural Resources – WOCAN), Phunschok Tshering (Bhutan Association of Women Entrepreneurs – BAWE), Dr Manohara Khadka (ICIMOD), and chair Dr Ritu Verma (ICIMOD). The panelists deliberated on how women are engaging in rural transformative processes through policies and approaches that ensure economic and social empowerment of disadvantaged rural women. The panelists reflected on societal and gender power relations, multiple marginalities, institutional governance, and dominant environmental discourses as key elements that constrain women's economic power. Effectively contributing to the equitable status of mountain women requires strategic thinking reinforced by gender transformative policy reforms, actions, commitment, and collective action. The discussion was framed by three guiding questions.

What are some of the major gains, back-sliding and frustrations in advancing women's economic power and women's movements in rural development in Bhutan and Nepal in the last decade? How did we get here?

Positive gains: Following the declaration of Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), Nepal in its third pillar of the 10th Five Year Plan (2002-2007) highlighted excluded groups, such as women. However, it was after the second 'people's war' in 2006 that gender and social inclusion issues received greater attention in national debates and discussions. The Comprehensive Peace Accord in 2006 recognized gender inequality, social exclusion, discrimination, and economic poverty as driving forces for conflict. The subsequent Interim Constitution 2007 strongly emphasized gender, governance, and devolution and mandated state institutions to include at least 33 per cent women in executive bodies and organizations at all levels. For the first time in 2008, Nepal's government was composed of 32.77 per cent women in the Constituent Assembly and made a provision for a 25 per cent tax reduction on land registration fees when women purchased land in their names.

As a land-locked mountainous country with a small population, Bhutan's journey of working on gender issues began with some seriousness when the government established the National Commission for Women and Children (NCWC) in 2004 as the coordinating and reporting agency in relation to the CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against

Women). In the same year, several NGOs were created to work on gender issues, and they have been gaining momentum. An important international conference was organized in 2012, Bhutan+10: Gender and Sustainable Mountain Development in a Changing World (www.icimod.org/bhutan+10/) which further pushed forward the agenda.

Tenacious challenges: Despite the achievements, there has been some black-sliding and frustration in transforming women's economic power. Although women are heavily involved in agriculture, forestry and natural resource management activities, their participation in markets, entrepreneurial activities and decision making is nominal. Women are often excluded in value chains of high-income products, and most decisions related to cash crops remain in the hands of men. Men's outmigration to urban centres and foreign countries has exacerbated women's workloads in all areas while they continue to disproportionately shoulder responsibilities for care giving, household work, and subsistence farming. This together constrains them from participating in business, trade, governance and networking activities. At institutional levels, there is often limited political commitment for implementing gender



policies. For example, many ministries in Nepal have gender focal points, but they lack the strongly defined roles, decision-making power, resources, and rigorous technical training required to ensure impact.

Although matrilineal land tenure regimes in Bhutan provide women strong inheritance rights over land and property, they continue to experience both subtle and pronounced forms of gender discrimination, including gender-based violence. In the past, many parents in

Bhutan did not feel the need to formally educate their daughters as they did sons who gained opportunities for earning incomes. Due to increased public awareness, more girls are now gaining access to formal education. However, compared to boys, the drop-out rates of girls is higher, resulting in less girls completing high school and college. Further, men continue to be regarded as 'farmers', 'heads of household', income generators, and community leaders, demonstrating some degree of bias towards patriarchal norms, values, and beliefs.



What kind of opportunities, challenges, and traps exist in community-based development and approaches such as the 'green economy' in the context of rapid change?

Opportunities: Through well-established natural resource management policies and approaches such as community-based forestry in Nepal and joint forest management in India, grassroots women and men participate and have greater awareness regarding development issues. Opportunities are increasing for socially inclusive development approaches, strong alliances between civil society and NGOs, feminist movements and the number of cooperatives and women's groups continues to grow.

Challenges: The HKH is influenced by global development discourses that promote the green economy. Although this approach can create opportunities for grassroots women and men to participate in and benefit from environmental conservation and low carbon activities, it also poses some problems. Economic perspectives dominate the dialogues and frameworks to the detriment of other critical social, cultural, and political issues. The green

economy is not only about promoting economic incentives but also about ensuring equitable access to these incentives. It is also important to keep in mind that most often more women than men are negatively affected by climate and socioeconomic changes in the region, which increases their food insecurity and workloads.

What makes the Hindu Kush Himalayas different and unique from other parts of the world? What alternative approaches can it offer the rest of the world as possible food for thought?

Uniqueness: The HKH is not only characterized by rich biodiversity and natural resources, but also women's and men's strong socio-cultural and spiritual relationship and attachment to their land and environments. The region sustains diverse cultures, livelihoods, modes of governance, economies, and sacred sites and is distinguished by high levels of remoteness, and environmental fragility and areas that are particularly hazard prone. Some challenging features of its uniqueness are economic poverty and gender inequalities characterized by skewed divisions of labour, access and ownership of land, decision making power and participation in governance institutions that disadvantage women.

Alternative visions and approaches: The HKH also offers hope and food for thought through alternative approaches for sustainable development. Bhutan's Gross National Happiness is an approach that situates development beyond material-centric concepts. It argues that not only material resources but also cultural and social values ultimately determine women's and men's happiness. Community-based approaches work towards strengthening the capacities of customary and statutory institutions for natural resource management as they are key for adapting to rapid climate and socioeconomic changes. Strengthening such institutions with particular attention to gender-focused and integrative planning, implementation, monitoring, governance, leadership development, capacity strengthening, benefit sharing, budgeting, and decision making are essential for transforming women's economic power. Similarly, strategizing and supporting women's collective action, social movements, networking, and leadership can go a long way in transforming women's lives in positive ways.

Ways forward from the ground up

The Hindu Kush Himalayan region cannot grow its economy and achieve the happiness and wellbeing of its people by excluding half the population who are often at the margins of development. Greater attention to gender equality, empowerment, and transformative change is urgently needed. Grassroots voices and concerns as stated below require renewed attention from development actors, researchers, policy makers, and civil society.

Culturally appropriate and gender-sensitive technologies

- Invest in gender-friendly clean energy technologies with the potential of reducing women's workloads and increasing their economic and political power and overall wellbeing
- Promote sustainable livelihood and economic options for young men and women to reduce outmigration from villages, with careful attention that women's already overburdened workloads do not increase
- Support and encourage women scientists and researchers, and ensure equal opportunities for formal education, training, and leadership skills

Transformations in knowledge

- Ensure rigorous analysis and integration of gender-specific economic poverty indicators of mountain livelihood strategies and activities, including ecosystem services
- Ensure women meaningfully participate in mountain development dialogues, processes, and institutions, including in the development and implementation of climate change policies, funding, and impact assessments
- Recognize that both women and men have knowledge, agency, and responsibilities for



conserving and managing natural resources in mountains and ensure opportunities for their equal participation, voice, influence, decision making, and benefit sharing

Policy action

- Ensure social-cultural dimensions of sustainable development in national policy instruments with a focus on gender equity in decision making and benefit sharing
- Introduce, enforce, and assess gender equity in legislation, policy, and governance practices related to natural resources management in mountains
- Institutionalize gender audits, gender championing, gender analytical expertise, and gender disaggregated indicators and databases in natural resource sector activities
- Ensure policy implementation of women's access to and control over productive resources (e.g., land, technologies, enterprises, livestock, skills, information, economic incentives), recognizing this as their human rights
- Ensure gender budgets, strong policies, strategies, and strong wording in development programmes, instruments and action plans



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