

Gender Equality as a Key Strategy for Achieving Equitable and Sustainable Development in Mountains: The Case of the Hindu Kush–Himalayas

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Gender Equality as a Key Strategy for Achieving Equitable and Sustainable Development in Mountains

ICIMOD

The Case of the Hindu Kush–Himalayas

The International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD) believes in a future where the mountain people of the Hindu Kush–Himalayas can experience enhanced livelihoods, equity, and social and environmental security; where they can adapt to environmental, socioeconomic, and climate change; and where future generations of mountain and downstream populations can enjoy the benefits and opportunities afforded by the region's natural endowment. ICIMOD is an intergovernmental center that develops and shares information and knowledge, facilitates learning, and uses innovation and effective communication to empower its eight regional member countries—Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, India, Myanmar, Nepal, and Pakistan—and the women, men, and children living there. ICIMOD believes that interventions are most successful when they take into account the points of view of everyone in society, regardless of gender, caste, or ethnicity. Inclusiveness is the hallmark of ICIMOD's work.

Gender equality

At a time when gender equality and women's empowerment are gaining momentum worldwide, there is great hope and potential for gender transformative change. Such change can help to ensure sustainable environments, increased well-being of mountain communities, and equal sharing of development and decision-making benefits among women and men, as well as girls and boys.

The efforts and strategies that we put into place today can have important impacts in the future, based on critical lessons learned from past efforts. One important lesson from several decades of gender research is that although gender

relations play a critical role in the management of natural resources, women tend to be systematically disadvantaged in terms of access to resources, decision-making, and, ultimately, power relations. Women are not passive victims, however. Women have critically valuable knowledge and agency—as researchers, farmers, natural resource managers, water users, pastoralists, entrepreneurs, scientists, engineers, artisans, preservers of culture, and important players in many other roles that are key to ensuring sustainable environments and the well-being of mountain communities. Gender analysis is a valuable tool for understanding these roles and processes, but action, resources, and policies that specifically support and improve women's lives are also necessary—just as it is necessary to recognize the important role that men play in championing gender empowerment.

Despite great momentum and hope, the road ahead to achieving equitable livelihoods that prioritize women's and men's well-being remains long. According to global estimates, 60% of the world's chronically hungry people are women and girls (WFP 2009). In Asia, women carry out a disproportionate amount of agricultural, income-generating, household, care, and community work, yet they own no more than about 11% of the land, which is far below the global average of 20% of land owned by women (FAO 2010). Moreover, gender issues in mountain contexts present particular challenges and nuances. Climate change, for example, is expected to affect generations to come, including those living downstream of mountains (Molden

and Sharma 2013); and these effects are highly gendered, affecting women and men in different ways. Women and girls are frontline adapters to change: they are often disproportionately affected by climate and socioeconomic changes, and at the same time they are vital to adaptation efforts in mountain contexts, where high rates of migrating men mean that women and girls take over the main responsibilities for managing and negotiating natural resources (Figure 1), households, communities, and everyday survival (Nellemann et al 2011).

To reduce women's and girls' vulnerability to the multiple impacts of global change, and to increase the capacity of society as a whole to adapt to change, women and girls must be put center stage in strategies for sustainable development and related decision-making processes in the coming decades. However, mountain women—especially those living in remote rural areas—face a number of challenges, including limited access to development services, information, credit, opportunities, governance institutions, and productive resources such as land, livestock, inputs, income, and culturally appropriate technologies. Their work burden is often extremely heavy because of their multiple responsibilities in farming, livestock herding, water and forest management, and household and community life. Yet they continue to be underrepresented in decision-making forums and institutions, and they experience numerous and sometime insidious forms of gender inequality, including outright gender-based violence. Against this background, and considering the diversity of cultural and environmental contexts in mountains,

FIGURE 1 Rice field in Kathmandu Valley: With men engaging in labor migration, mountain women remain behind to manage their community's natural resources. (Photo by Karen Konniff)



we need to pursue different strategies to achieve gender equality. We need to work toward shifting power relations that disadvantage women and toward eliminating gender discrimination against women and girls both in policy formulation and in practice. We need to ensure that all research initiatives and policy interventions respond to women's needs and priorities first and foremost. Securing women's access to and control over political, economic, sociocultural, and natural resources and improving their meaningful participation in decision-making are equally vital to achieving gender equality and empowerment.

The Bhutan+10 Conference

Many of these critical and emerging issues were discussed, debated, and strategized at an international

conference entitled "Bhutan+10: Gender and Sustainable Mountain Development in a Rapidly Changing World." Organized in October 2012 by the Royal Government of Bhutan through the National Commission for Women and Children and the Ministry of Agriculture and Forests, together with ICIMOD, and supported by the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) and the German Federal Ministry for Economic Development Cooperation (BMZ), the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), the Mountain Partnership, the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), and SNV, the conference brought together close to 170 participants from around the globe, among them some of the world's best

minds on gender issues. They discussed the pressing matter of sustainable mountain development in a rapidly changing world (Verma and Gurung 2014). The conference reviewed progress, took stock of major achievements and challenges in the past decade, reviewed the state of the art, shared cutting-edge knowledge and practices in gender and mountain development, and developed a new agenda to effect real gender positive change and impact for the next decade. It led the way in rethinking problematic modes of "gender mainstreaming," proposing a more gender transformative framework for change and power relations (Verma 2013). The conference also led to the formation of a regional gender network, Women, Gender, Environment, and Mountains (W-GEM), and it concluded with the *Bhutan+10 Declaration* (NCWC et al

2012). The present Special Issue of *Mountain Research and Development* (MRD) is a further valuable outcome of the conference.

The conference participants sent out a powerful message, encapsulated in the *Bhutan+10 Declaration* (see Box 1) and in the many presentations, seminars, panels, and discussions that took place during the action-packed week: the bar needs to be raised, commitments need to be renewed and strengthened, and support and action for gender transformative change have to be stepped up for mountain regions and people across the globe (Molden 2014). Conferences such as Bhutan+10 and, in another decade, Bhutan+20 not only create momentum for gender-focused and integrative action-oriented research but also help to strengthen individual and institutional capacities and incentives, bolster women's leadership, expand women's and gender networks, and ensure equitable outcomes and transformative change for the worlds' mountain women, men, and children.

Gendered regional collaboration

As an intergovernmental organization with regional member countries stretching from Afghanistan in the east to China and Myanmar in the west, including Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, and Pakistan, ICIMOD is seeing positive gender transformative change happen in the region. ICIMOD and its partners are fully committed to supporting such change now and in the future. The challenges ahead are immense, however. Regional collaboration and joint efforts will make the difference required to successfully address economic poverty and hunger, to ensure the well-being of mountain women and men, and to sustain their precious environments.

ICIMOD connects women and girls from the region by generating

BOX 1: The *Bhutan+10 Declaration*

In the *Bhutan+10 Declaration*, the participants of the Bhutan+10 Conference on Gender and Sustainable Mountain Development in a Changing World, held in Thimphu, Bhutan, on 15–19 October 2012, called for

- *A better integration of mountain perspectives in sectoral, local, national, regional, and international development agendas;*
- *The systematic strengthening of gender perspectives and indigenous knowledge in all mountain development policies, strategies, and programmes and in national and regional organizations working on mountain development;*
- *Allocation of sufficient human and financial resources to promote women scientists working on mountain issues and those from mountain regions, to enhance their leadership skills, and to meet their networking needs; to institutionalize gender disaggregated data and analysis; and to ensure that mountain development actions are gender responsive and sensitive, thereby addressing gender issues in the mountains;*
- *Affirmative action and strengthening of local governance bodies to support inclusive and integrated mountain development which would fulfil the needs of both women and men on an equal basis;*
- *Technical assistance of regional and international organizations to mountain countries to support the development of interdisciplinary knowledge for mountain development and gender-responsive strategies;*
- *Recognition of women's strengths, knowledge, and capacities in adapting to climate change and emphasis on women's social capital;*
- *Action to make the results of research available to mountain women in language that is accessible and relevant to ensure impacts;*
- *Investment in technologies, infrastructure, and institutional strengthening that are responsive to gender-specific needs, reduce women's workloads, improve their leadership skills and access to information, break their isolation and exclusion from economic and governance bodies, support girls' education, and increase their access to basic services, financial resources, and markets;*
- *Promote the Gross National Happiness of women and men in mountain countries.*

The full text of the *Bhutan+10 Declaration* and more information about the Bhutan+10 Conference are available at: <http://www.icimod.org/bhutan+10/>

valuable research and knowledge on gender and natural resource management, conducting outreach efforts, networking, and disseminating useful information on women's strategies and successes in achieving gender equality and empowerment. In order to demonstrate positive gendered impacts on the ground, ICIMOD has been conducting gender-analytical research for almost two decades. It has carried out work in this area focusing on biodiversity, rangelands, early warning systems, disaster risk reduction, value chains, income-generating opportunities, community-based forestry,

agriculture, and water management. Most recently, it has contributed much-needed knowledge through publications on gender and adaptation to climate change (Nellemann et al 2011), gender and biodiversity management (Khadka and Verma 2012), and gender and pastoralism (Verma and Khadka 2014). Some programs have dedicated components addressing the role of women and gender, while others integrate gender as a cross-cutting issue in research on topics such as adaptation to climate change, water management, reducing black carbon, or managing landscapes. Under its Gender Strategic

Institutional Function, ICIMOD implements gender positive actions to strengthen the role of women, including initiatives such as the annual gender champion's award, women's leadership trainings, a gender equity policy (ICIMOD 2013) and guidelines for its implementation, gender sensitivity trainings, and gender auditing.

Commitment to gender-transformative change is enshrined in ICIMOD's policies, strategic plans, and everyday practices. For instance, ICIMOD's 5-year plan highlights in its vision the importance of improving the well-being of women, men, and children in healthy environments of the Hindu Kush–Himalayas (ICIMOD 2012a). Cross-cutting issues of gender, governance, inclusive development, and poverty are also at the foundation of our thematic areas and development cycles. Building on past achievements and ongoing gender positive practices, the plan envisions strengthened and enhanced traction in terms of gender integration and gender-focused work. To achieve this, the plan explicitly maps out a gender strategy. This strategy not only outlines specific approaches for integrating gender into the research agenda but also proposes specific actions to strengthen women's leadership capacities and promotes gender-positive transformations through more inclusive policies, partnerships, and organizational change. Most importantly, these efforts need to have positive impacts for those to whom we are ultimately accountable: the region's economically poorest, most discriminated, and most marginalized people, many of whom are women and girls.

A future agenda for gender empowerment

In the wake of the Bhutan+10 Conference and the Rio+20 Summit, as the world debates the post-2015 development agenda, we find ourselves

at an important moment in history. The time is ripe for taking stock of past achievements and challenges and developing new strategies to ensure positive outcomes for the multitude of women and girls who continue to live in dire economic poverty, hunger, degraded environments, and unequal gender power relations. The present Special Issue of *MRD* not only provides ample food for thought on some of the most pressing gender and mountain development issues of our time but also provides a road map and conceptual framework for gender transformative change as we look toward Bhutan+20 in the next decade (Verma et al 2014).

In enhancing the livelihoods of women, it will be important to put into action a "program of work on gender for mountains," through numerous efforts across diverse mountain contexts, within various organizations, and as individuals. Imagine what can be possible if development policies, initiatives, and strategies continue to actively address the gender dimensions of poverty, hunger, and unequal access to resources—problems that are particularly pronounced in mountain contexts. Envision the possibilities as we actively work toward ensuring gender-sensitive policies, eliminating gender discrimination, and achieving gender equality for future generations. Imagine what can be possible once women and girls are given due recognition as strategically important actors, knowledge innovators, and decision-makers in their own right.

ICIMOD continues to be committed to gender transformative change as outlined in its *Strategy and Results Framework* (ICIMOD 2012b). We are working to achieve this change through four pillars: (1) action-oriented gender-integrative and gender-focused research, (2) gender positive organizational change, (3) capacity strengthening and women's leadership, and (4) gender-inclusive policies and partnerships. ICIMOD strives to realize its vision of men, women, and children of the Hindu Kush–Himalayas enjoying improved well-being in a healthy mountain environment.

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