



Advancing the Mountain Women's Agenda

a report on a global gathering 'Celebrating Mountain Women'
in Bhutan, October 2002



International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development



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Advancing the Mountain Women's Agenda

Reporting on a global gathering in the

International Year of Mountains

"Celebrating Mountain Women" –

1-4 October 2002

Paro, Bhutan

Executive Summary

Women living in the mountain regions of the world make major but invisible contributions to both their local and national economies. They are the main producers of food crops and are managers of common property resources, with principal responsibility for assuring food security. Women have access to, and control over, an enormous store of indigenous knowledge and wisdom. As men migrate and leave the mountains for long periods of time, mountain women's workload and responsibilities increase substantially. Yet national policies and data hardly ever reflect these ground realities. Hence the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD) and the Mountain Forum proposed that an international meeting for and on mountain women be held during the International Year of Mountains (IYM) 2002 to highlight the role of women in sustainable mountain development. Most importantly, the gathering would be a 'pinnacle' event in a process whereby mountain women's networks could grow, be strengthened, and contribute to more sensitive policies and practices that empower mountain women and communities in innovative ways. This gathering, called "Celebrating Mountain Women", brought together approximately 250 mountain people, and included

- Indigenous mountain women
- Representatives of mountain women's formal and informal groups
- Key academics and resource persons from different mountain regions
- Women entrepreneurs
- Local/elected political leaders

- Media representatives
- Policy makers and planners
- Donors

The problems and progress of mountain women in the following five major theme areas were examined from a gender perspective within the framework of policy, practice, and research:

- Natural Resources and Environment
- Health and Well-being
- Entrepreneurship
- Legal, Political, and Human Rights
- Culture and Indigenous Knowledge

This first-of-its-kind, global celebration of mountain women focused on empowerment through innovation and entrepreneurship; and provided a platform for mountain women to articulate their concerns, as well as share their experiences and ideas related to the future of mountain livelihoods and cultures. CMW was an effort to put mountain women centre-stage, and to mainstream their reality into the year-long IYM discussions, the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) 2002, and The Bishkek Global Mountain Summit, in order to enable a major paradigm shift. Additionally, CMW allowed a message from mountain women to be sent, in the form of the "Thimphu Declaration" which was drafted and sent to BGMS immediately after CMW. The Global Mountain Women's Partnership was launched at Bishkek as a programme to translate the demands of mountain women into action, post-CMW and post-IYM.

Foreword

The year 2002, formally declared “International Year of Mountains” by the United Nations, was an important year for mountain people and mountain issues. It was an equally important year for us here at the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD) as IYM provided us with many unique opportunities to highlight the issues of mountain people and their environment. One such opportunity was the organisation of the global gathering “Celebrating Mountain Women” (CMW) which was the only global event throughout the year which focused on the women of the mountains. It brought together approximately 250 women and men from 35 countries to celebrate the drive and spirit of mountain women, to discuss critical issues at hand, and search for new ways forward.

This global gathering was an attempt to recognise and draw the world’s attention to mountain women’s immense contribution to sustaining life in harsh and fragile environments; to their roles, responsibilities, and rights as the nurturers of their families and communities; and to their stewardship of mountain ecosystems. It was chance to admire and appreciate mountain women’s resilience and drive, their arduous labour, and their willingness to adapt to a changing milieu by taking on entrepreneurial activities to catch up with monetised economies whilst still preserving their old traditions and cultures for future generations. It is they who are the reservoirs of precious indigenous knowledge, and it is they who in the face of change and new challenges, struggle to keep themselves, their families and their communities intact. As their men out-migrate in ever-increasing numbers, life and living in the mountains is becoming harder by the day for the young, the old, and for women.

The gathering created a space for learning, connecting mountain women so they might share their experiences, exchange knowledge, and bring to light gender issues from different mountain areas of the world. Viable and compelling lessons were shared, applicable across different regions, where degraded upland environments and threatened food security affect the livelihoods of mountain women. Gaps in knowledge were identified and further research recommended to allow concrete action. Finally, working group sessions looked at ways of creating opportunities for mountain women to be recognised as ‘agents of change’.

A number of intense discussions and presentations took place. These were built around the five theme areas of CMW, namely, ‘Entrepreneurship’, ‘Culture and Indigenous Knowledge’, ‘Health and Well-being’, ‘Natural Resources and Environment’, and ‘Legal, Political and Human Rights’. Finally, each group made recommendations to be incorporated in the Thimphu Declaration, which was later presented at the Bishkek Global Mountain Summit in Kyrgyzstan, where the world came together to discuss mountain policies to ensure sustainable mountain development.

As part of the celebrations, we put together various informal activities and events that exemplified mountain women’s important and varying roles in their society. Included was a Mountain Costume Show, which showcased the elaborate costumes that had been woven, spun, or stitched by the mountain women themselves, in most cases with local materials. These costumes displayed the aspects of culture and tradition that make mountain women proud and unique and are living testimony to their exceptional talent and enduring spirit.

The exhibition stalls displayed an eclectic collection of arts, crafts, ceramics, clothing, food, herbs, and spices, as well as other products produced by women of various mountain regions of the world. This was an excellent way to highlight the scope of mountain women’s innovation, talent, and entrepreneurial skills. It also provided a chance for mountain women to exchange ideas and share the stories of their lives and their work with participants from other parts of the world. Many were seen exchanging gifts from each other’s regions, buying different items, and selling their products to those attending.

The human relationships that were established were perhaps the most inspiring result of the CMW gathering. We would like to thank each and every participant who helped make this event happen, and hope that this report is of help in bringing to life the proceedings of the conference.

I would also like to put on record how grateful both ICIMOD and mountain women are to those whose generous financial assistance helped make CMW possible:

- The International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), Rome

- United Nations Development Fund for Women, South Asia Regional Office (UNIFEM-SARO), New Delhi, India
- Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), Berne, Switzerland
- Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida)
- Interchurch Organization for Development Cooperation (ICCO), The Netherlands
- Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), Rome
- Austrian Development Cooperation in Bhutan (ACB)

We are also grateful to the Mountain Forum and The Mountain Institute, who made significant in-kind support to the organisation of this major event. The global organising and steering committees, who guided the process throughout the year, are among the many whom we should thank for standing together with ICIMOD as a team in order to make CMW a success.

J. Gabriel Campbell, PhD
Director General

Acknowledgements

“In mountain regions, as in the world over, women, as a class, are more undernourished, more under-compensated for their labour, and are more under-represented in formal decision-making bodies than men, as a class.”

“What is clearly missing is a description of their situation as told by mountain women themselves.”

“...it is clear that state structures are dominated by patriarchal interests that have worked to the detriment of women.”

These are some excerpts from ICIMOD's publication (1999), *Searching for Women's Voices in the Hindu Kush-Himalayas* edited by J.D. Gurung, which was based on fact-finding studies conducted by researchers in the regional member countries of ICIMOD. The book was published as a first attempt to reach out and consolidate mountain women's situation and perspectives on national and international policies and mountain development in general.

Against this background, the then-Director General of ICIMOD, Mr. Egbert Pelinck, had proposed at the First Mountain Forum Council Meeting in Cusco, Peru (October 1999), that ICIMOD would host and organise an international conference for mountain women as part of its plans for celebrating IYM 2002. ICIMOD organised a planning meeting in May 2001 in which 22 senior women professionals from 13 countries participated. Next, ICIMOD raised funds to host the larger global gathering of mountain women, which eventually grew into the gathering in Bhutan of 250 mountain women and men from 35 countries around the globe, called “Celebrating Mountain Women”.

This was a historic and unique event by any standards. It was the very first global conference that focused only on mountain women. It was also ICIMOD's only global event in its year-long list of activities organised to celebrate the International Year of Mountains. This was an event which was geared to bringing real mountain women together, to listen to them and hear their stories. Some of the outputs — audio, video and print proceedings, briefs, and a resource kit — are simply the testimonies of mountain women from all over the globe. In the end, CMW was a down-to-earth, yet unforgettable gathering with much life, energy and colour.

Without the foresight, vision and commitment shown by ICIMOD's recent ex-Director General, Mr. Egbert Pelinck, and the current Director General, Dr J.G. Campbell; and without the passion of my senior ex-colleague Jeannette D. Gurung for mountain women; I am sure CMW would not have been realised. We appreciate the initial grant made available to us by two United Nations agencies — the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), Rome, which meant that a well-represented planning meeting could be organised in May 2001. The highest level delegate at this planning meeting was Ms. Chandni Joshi, Regional Director of the South Asia Regional Office of the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM-SARO), New Delhi: herself a mountain woman with a difference. Ms. Joshi's pledge of the first major portion of funds to implement the planned activities was immediately matched by IFAD, Rome, through its WID grant from the Government of Japan. The Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), Berne, joined us next as mountain women occupy an important place on their development agenda. The grants that later followed from the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida); the Interchurch Organization for Development Cooperation (ICCO), The Netherlands; the Austrian Coordination Bureau for Development in Bhutan (ACB); together with the organisational and outreach support from the Mountain Forum and The Mountain Institute are highly valued. All assistance that came our way was appreciated, both in kind and in funds.

I am sure this celebration would have remained a dream had it not been for the diversity of the support the CMW team received. We have benefited immensely from the willing guidance of the five Global Steering Committee members: Ms. Anita Anand for Asia-Pacific, Ms. Elizabeth Byers for North America, Ms. Josefa Nolte for Latin America, Ms. Francoise Mees for Europe, and Dr. Esther Njiro for Africa. We also knew that organising committee members were always there for us to assist in any situation if required. Dr. Govind Kelkar was one of those who most ably and willingly took upon herself the coordination of the research component of CMW. The Chief Executive Officer and President of The Mountain Institute, Ms. Catherine Cooke, was one of the most inspiring and encouraging of partners and she was instrumental, among

other things, in mobilising a number of mainstream media and other professionals from North America.

Media coverage of CMW was something we tried to pay particular attention to. The Women's Feature Service (WFS) ably managed the media aspects by sensitising the media to mountain women and their issues in order to create a 'multiplier effect' and a lasting impact on general audiences around the world. Among other things, the WFS sent out pre-conference postings, daily press releases over the Internet from Paro, and post-CMW news releases. WFS tried to get the media interested enough to come to CMW to write about mountain women. Let me take this opportunity to thank all media organisations who demonstrated their support and offered mountain women their space in the media by sending their representatives to participate in CMW. The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), Newsweek, United News of India, The Times of India, South China Morning Post, Nepali Times, and Kuensel were among the major media houses represented, while we also had the good fortune of having with us some free-lance journalists who were making films on women or preparing stories for major women's magazines.

Above all, what I found most touching was the spontaneous goodwill and participation by my country Bhutan, and its determination to help make CMW a success under any circumstances. Without the keenness and enthusiasm of the Royal Government of Bhutan as a whole and the Ministry of Agriculture, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Dzongkhag Administration of Paro, the Management of Wang Watershed Project in Paro, and the commitment and interest of all the staff concerned, the organisation of such a large gathering in Paro would have been an impossible task. The management of Druk Air was also most supportive. Mr. Wangchuk Wangdi and Ms. Sonam Chopel of Thunder Dragon Tours and Treks handled most ably the highly complicated travel schedules of the international participants coming from five regions of the globe. Mr. Wangdi went out of his way to fly to Bangkok at his own cost to "shepherd" (as he said) some of the participants into Paro.

I owe special gratitude to Dasho Sangay Thinlay, ICIMOD Board Member, whose committed leadership and enduring support helped ensure that we received coordinated assistance. Dasho took a deep interest in the event and painstakingly visited the venue several times beforehand, staying at the venue throughout the duration of the conference.

Aum Neten Zangmo, Bhutan's Cabinet Secretary and its highest-ranking woman official, was exemplary in her expression of support and solidarity. Despite her busy schedule and her responsibilities as cabinet secretary, Ms. Zangmo took a sincere interest in CMW and stayed at the venue throughout the conference. She was most informal, and moved around freely discussing issues with participants, giving interviews, as well as always ensuring that the locally elected Bhutanese women participants were taking part in the event and were comfortable.

The input provided by Ms. Dorji Yangki, professional architect of the Special Commission for Social and Religious Affairs, cannot be matched, as it was she who designed and supervised the making of the ramp for the Mountain Costume Show in the open grounds of Olathang Hotel on which mountain women paraded to show off their costumes on that memorable evening. We are equally grateful to civil engineer Tshering Dukpa of the Ministry of Agriculture who willingly managed the organisational and building work. It was again Ms. Dorji Yangki, together with her able and creative colleague Tshering Uden Penjor of the National Textile Museum, who choreographed and conducted the entire Mountain Costume Show.

The venue of Olathang Hotel and the help of "the man who never says no" — Mr. Chencho Tshering, manager — was a great blessing indeed. Despite never-ending demands, which were later extended to 250 women and men, Mr. Tshering went about his business with a smile and did his very best to cater to our needs.

Without the quiet, firm, organised, and efficient support I received from my friend and colleague Ms. Deki Pema of the Ministry of Agriculture I am not sure I would have survived it all! Tshering Gem was also superb, always ready to take orders from Deki and myself and implement them immediately.

Overall, I am deeply obliged to everyone in Bhutan who supported us and gave a helping hand at any time without any complaints.

We are so pleased and grateful to Himal Film South Asia and its team of Mr. Maneesh Shrestha, Ms. Ramyata Limbu, Mr. Basanta Thapa, and Mr. Sudarshan Karki, who put together the mountain women's mini film festival at CMW after months of searching for films specifically on mountain women. It was a most valuable input. While Mr. Shrestha could not travel to Paro, the rest of the team overcame the initial technical difficulties and did a good job with the shows, which gained quick popularity.

And of course we are extremely grateful to the participants who readily accepted the invitation to be facilitators and did an able job of leading the sessions. The documentation and editorial team led by Mr. Amba Jamir and his creative and 'roving' reporters and artists put in many intense hours of work to help us come out with an innovative documentation style. The conference briefs provide the gist of all the exchanges that took place at CMW, while a resource kit attempts to capture the essence, colour, and excitement of the event. The two products include and reflect the expressions, voices, and perspectives of a number of mountain women who contributed to the process.

I must thank my dear ICIMOD colleagues who stood by me throughout this period of organising and implementing CMW. Special thanks and gratitude are due to Dr. J.G. Campbell, Director General, who accorded high priority to the project and took a personal interest in helping ensure that we were on track. My appreciation and thanks go to

Mr. Rajen Upreti and his travel and hospitality team who put in many hours of hard work as we were finalising the travel itineraries. To Mr. Milan Tuladhar, Mr. Rajendra Mali, and Mr. Kiran Shrestha — I will never be able to thank you enough as you demonstrated your willingness and capacity to be flexible and open when the situation called for it. Thank you for your support.

Thanks also to the prompt and generous help from my senior colleague, Mr. Anupam Bhatia. His superb photographic skills mean that we have beautiful still pictures from the Mountain Costume Show and the gathering as a whole, which vividly capture the colour and essence of the gathering. Many of these have been scanned and put into a photo gallery on the www.mountainwomen.net website. The video documentation displays the beauty of the costumes still further. Ms. Ragini Deshpande and her camera team did a wonderful job of filming the whole event. We have made copies of the film on video CD, which will be available to all participants as a memento of CMW. The four minute video clip will also be uploaded on our website to reach a wider audience.

Without the untiring, energetic, efficient, prompt, and intelligent support from my colleagues Ms. Ojaswi Josse and Ms. Atsuko Toda, the teamwork that went into making CMW a success would not have been possible. Together we could rely upon Ms. Anita Anand, steering committee member for Asia-Pacific, who flew up from Delhi at short notice to give us a helping hand.

And last and most importantly, thanks are due to the participants for coming to CMW, despite the hazards and endless challenges of international travel, and the adjustments in personal lives as mothers, daughters, wives, and farmers that had to be made simply to get away.

The single most beautiful aspect of “Celebrating Mountain Women” was that bonds were established between mountain women from all over the world. Thank you for being there to make CMW 2002 an unforgettable reality.

Phuntshok Chhoden Tshering
ICIMOD, Coordinator of CMW 2002

List of acronyms and abbreviations

ACB	-	Austrian Coordination Bureau, Bhutan
AKRSP	-	Agha Khan Rural Support Programme
BBC	-	British Broadcasting Corporation
BGMS	-	Bishkek Global Mountain Summit
CBS	-	Central Bureau of Statistics
CEDAW	-	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women
CEO	-	Chief Executive Officer
CMW	-	Celebrating Mountain Women
FAO	-	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
FWCW	-	Fourth World Conference on Women
GDP	-	Gross Domestic Product
GMWP	-	Global Mountain Women's Partnership
HKH	-	Hindu Kush-Himalayas
ICCO	-	Interchurch Cooperation Organization
ICTs	-	Information and Communication Technologies
IFAD	-	International Fund for Agricultural Development
IT	-	Information Technology
IYM	-	International Year of Mountains
NGO	-	Non-government Organisations
NTFP	-	Non-timber Forest Product
ODA	-	Overseas Development Assistance (Japanese Government)
RGOB	-	Royal Government of Bhutan
SDC	-	Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation
SHGs	-	Self-help Groups
Sida	-	Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency
SNV	-	Royal Netherlands Development Organisation
TMI	-	The Mountain Institute
UN	-	United Nations
UNCED	-	UN Conference on Environment and Development
UNEP	-	United Nations Environment Programme
UNFPA	-	United Nations Population Fund
UNIFEM	-	United Nations Development Fund for Women
WFS	-	Women's Feature Service
WSSD	-	World Summit on Sustainable Development

Brief on Authors

Phuntshok Chhoden Tshering (Bhutan)
Coordinator of CMW- ICIMOD

Currently serving as Coordinator of Gender Mainstreaming at ICIMOD, Phuntshok is part of the new Integrated Programme for Culture, Equity, Gender, and Governance in the HKH. With a natural sciences background, she has experience and training in both the natural and social science fields of development. At ICIMOD, her work focuses on a range of gender-related issues in mountain farming systems, enterprise development, women's entrepreneurship, capacity building for gender and organisational development, and now gender equity and women's empowerment to mainstream gender more effectively. She is the Gender Representative in Management and is a member of several other project and activity teams at ICIMOD. Phuntshok was appointed to coordinate and lead the organisation and implementation of the CMW conference in Bhutan, which brought together over 250 mountain women and men from 35 countries, to commemorate the International Year of Mountains 2002.

Ojaswi Josse (Nepal)
Assistant Coordinator of CMW – ICIMOD

Ojaswi was recruited to assist in the preparation and implementation of the CMW project. She is a graduate of international relations from San Francisco State University, California, and has a keen interest in development and women's issues. After the completion of her graduate studies she decided to return to Nepal and work in the field of women's development. She has also worked for the WWF Nepal Programme as a research consultant and as an assistant to the Asia Director at the International Development Exchange (IDEX), a San Francisco-based NGO working towards fighting global inequalities. Ojaswi eventually plans to pursue a doctorate degree in development studies after a few years of on-hand experience.

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