

Articles on CMW

The First Global Mountain Summit

By Anita Anand

Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, November 4, (WFS): The largest-ever gathering of governments, international organisations, NGOs, and individuals concerned with mountain issues — the Bishkek Global Mountain Summit (BGMS) — closed last week, as the culminating event of the UN International Year of Mountains (IYM).

It adopted the Bishkek Mountain Platform, which is designed to guide governments and all involved with mountain issues on future activities and action in the 21st century. Its ultimate goal is to improve the livelihoods of mountain people, to protect mountain ecosystems, and to use mountain resources more wisely.

At the global level, the Bishkek Platform supports the International Partnership for Sustainable Development in Mountain Regions, agreed to at the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) held in Johannesburg in September 2002. A generous grant from the governments of Italy and Switzerland will enable the UN Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) — the lead agency — and the UN Environment Programme (UNEP), to ensure that follow-up institutional arrangements are made, including support to the proposed creation of a Network of Development Mountain States and Regions which forms part of the Partnership.

Although small by most UN standards, the Summit was an important one, not just for mountain people, but for all citizens of the world. Mountain areas cover 26 per cent of the Earth's land surface and host 12 per cent of its people. They provide essential resources for both mountain and lowland people, including fresh water for at least half of humanity, critical reserves of biodiversity, food, forests, and minerals. And, according to the Bishkek Platform,

climate change, natural hazards, and other forces are threatening the complex webs of life that mountain support.

All year long, the IYM has been celebrated with great élan across the world's mountain regions. Mountain people, many of whom have never been out of their ranges, have travelled to attend workshops, seminars, and conferences. They have been joined by others who care and work in and around mountain issues — NGOs, policy makers, media professionals, entrepreneurs and representatives of the donor community.

Just prior to BGMS, another one-of-a-kind meeting — Celebrating Mountain Women (CMW) — was held in Thimphu, Bhutan, in the first week of October. Hosted and organised by the Nepal-based International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD), the gathering in Bhutan produced the Thimphu Declaration, which was carried to Bishkek and presented at the plenary of the opening day of the BGMS.

As a follow-up strategy to CMW, the Global Mountain Women's Partnership (GMWP) was launched at Bishkek. The main objective of the Partnership is to promote the interest of mountain women, improve their livelihoods, and provide a framework for cooperation between mountain women and all stakeholders. At Bishkek, CMW representatives participated in roundtable sessions, addressed the plenary, provided inputs for drafting the Bishkek Platform for Action, and presented a session on the GMWP. About 600 people from 60 countries attended the Summit. Most delegations were from Central Asia. There was a strong South Asian presence from Nepal and Bhutan. India's Minister of State for Tourism and Culture, Vinod Khanna, led a small delegation. Participation from Latin America and Africa was low. Coming at the end of the year, and six weeks after the WSSD, fatigue and shortage of

funds were a major reason. About twenty-five per cent of the Summit was female. There were few women in delegations and none as head of delegations. There were no high-profile UN heads of agencies or donor institutions.

Barring all this, the Summit happened in the backdrop of the rather awesome snow covered central Tian Shan and Pamir Alay ranges, past the Ala-Too Square where a magnificent statue of Lenin — with his outstretched right arm — invited you to the view.

Most people attending the Summit said that Bishkek was only the beginning. And in coming together to define their agenda, they realise that the concerns of developing and developed mountain countries are sometimes similar, and sometimes different. “The differences are related to degrees of development. In a country like Bhutan, infrastructure such as roads, communications, and schools are a major challenge, and must be balanced between development and environmental considerations,” said Dr. Kinzang Dorji, Prime Minister of Bhutan.

No declaration is worth the paper it is written on if it does not have sound financial backing and a practical plan of action. As partnerships were a major strategic intervention and follow up, there was optimism and caution.

“We see partnerships as informal, benchmarking, quick, efficient, non-bureaucratic, and as keeping a log of what’s happening, where,” said Maritta Koch-Weser of NGO Earth 3000. She went on to stress that those partnerships should have institutional homes, as without this, it would be difficult to take them forward.

“We want to be cautious about the partnerships that mushroom here,” said Remo Gautshi, Deputy Director-General of the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, a major donor for the IYM and mountain development.

The Bishkek Declaration calls for capacity building and invites the science and technology community to come into the partnerships in programmes of research, monitoring and early warning systems. There is recognition that trans-boundary mountain regions have specific environmental, social, political, cultural, and economic characteristics, and potential for development. Therefore, they require specific approaches and resources.

At the national level, governments are called upon to delegate political decisions to the lowest possible level of decision-making, and to develop legislation, policies, and procedures in favour of mountain areas. There is a call for spatially disaggregated socioeconomic and environmental data that hampers the recognition and specific analysis of mountain livelihood issues. Governments are also called upon to introduce compensation mechanisms for goods and services provided by mountain communities, enterprises, or natural and cultural landscapes through negotiations between affected peoples and the beneficiaries. And to use information and

communication technologies to bring benefits to mountain people.

Mountains are a source of livelihood, beauty, spirituality, relaxation, and an opportunity to examine our roots. Most people living in the mountains experience hardships due to their remoteness and lack of infrastructure. If life is hard in the plains, it is doubly so in the mountains. The Summit brought this, and more, to light.

The Summit did not focus only on the problems, but what has worked, what can work, and what is needed to make things work. It brought together a year of hard work on mountain issues — a good start.

Mountain Women Raise Questions, Give Answers

By Anita Anand

Chambery, France, July 8, (WFS) — In the majestic city hall of the town of Chambery, located in Southern France, a two-day meeting on mountain women begins. Andre Gilbertas, President of Montanea, welcomes the participants.

“During the French Revolution, Sylvie de Concordet exclaimed: ‘At a time when women’s heads are being cut off, it is only natural that they demand to know why.’” Gilbertas stresses the fact that questions about mountain women are complex, difficult and sensitive. Mountain women face the same problems as women of the plains, but more amplified.

The United Nations General Assembly announced 2002 as the International Year of Mountains (IYM), and Chambery is the French focal point. This beautiful medieval city, nestled in the valley between the Bauges and Chartreuse massifs, served as host for the European preparatory meeting for Celebrating Mountain Women (CMW). A global gathering, CMW, will be held in Thimphu, Bhutan, in October this year.

How different are the lives and concerns of European mountain women from women in other parts of the world? “In traditional Alpine society, women were the first to get up and the last to go to bed. Just like their male peers, girls started working from the moment they could walk. Despite this, the financial well-being of the family, community, and village revolved around the women,” says Michela Zucca of the Centre for Alpine Ecology in Trento, Italy.

From the times of the hunters and gatherers, young girls and mothers maintained the ancient inheritance of knowledge, which allowed for the exploitation of forest resources, says Zucca. Medicinal herbs, small fruits, and mushrooms were collected and sold in markets. They worked the loom, knitted and provided clothing and linen, and made their homes more welcoming. In some areas, women would rent rooms or do ‘seasonal’ work in hotels.

There was no such thing as a holiday for women. A man had the local tavern, where a woman was not

allowed to enter unless she went to collect her drunken husband. In times of economic hardship, women left the villages before the men in some areas. Under the 'hereditary farm' system, daughters were forbidden to inherit land if they had brothers. They either married a prospective heir, or became servants in their fathers' homes. Otherwise they left home for evermore, and did the most menial of jobs far from their own village. Under these conditions, female protests were voiced in lyrical form or by telling or rewording stories of legends and myths. Thus women also became the custodians of customs, memory, and culture.

Migration from the mountain areas to plains is worldwide, and also common in the Alps. Zucca says that women began migrating when the men left. But women also left to get away from priests, villages, fathers, brothers, and husbands. She points out that in the last few years, the situation has changed. Disillusioned by the urban reality, more women in the Alpine region have begun economic activity and initiatives.

The main economy of the Alps — luxury hotels, mountain lift systems, and tendering of public works — is in the hands of men. But the economy of the valley or the family business that allows people to continue living in the high mountains is in the hands of women. Tourism has for a long time overtaken agricultural income, animal breeding, and rearing. It is the main income earner in the Alps, and in the hands of women. The majority of the tourism businesses are family-run, and even though the proprietor is a man, it is women who manage the business.

The Alps and Sardinia, both regions with great pastoral traditions, are leading the way in linking agriculture to tourism. In Sardinia, women have founded a farm-tourism association. "There is a new economic concept: the identity economy," says Zucca. Businesses whose origins date back to a remote past are developing in a modern way, with modern technology, and with different goals and objectives. In addition to generating an income, these initiatives preserve and assist a 're-launch' of traditional cultures, allowing them to become the base for supplementing incomes.

This is also happening in other parts of the world, a positive reconciliation of the old and new ways of working and making a living. The transition economies of Eastern Europe — Bulgaria, Slovenia, Albania, Armenia, and Ukraine — bring similar stories, with a difference. They are younger countries, but with years of tradition, not unlike what is happening in the Alps. There is a dearth of gender-disaggregated data, and few pro-women policies that are being implemented.

"Domestic violence in Albania remains behind closed doors and is supported by the traditional and patriarchal attitude attendant to the Kanun (code of customary laws used in northern Albania)," says Xhixhi Xheni Sinakoli. Despite this and other discrimination and obstacles facing women, there is an overwhelming need of women in this region to

be economically independent, and the entrepreneurial spirit is fierce.

"Women played an important role in the first entrepreneurial wave in Slovenia during the early 1990s," says Patricija Verbole. The transition from self-management to a market economy removed many administrative barriers for the establishment of a new venture. The service sector grew, and global trends increasingly favoured conditions that fostered women's entrepreneurship. In addition, says Verbole, high unemployment and a job market in which women were not skilled to enter the workforce, or be in managerial positions, encouraged them to the turn to entrepreneurial activities.

The European gathering agreed on a Chambéry Declaration, which will serve as a draft to the Thimphu Declaration, to be finalised in the October global gathering, and sent to the Bishkek Global Mountain Summit (BGMS) — the final event of the IYM.

The Chambéry Declaration calls for recognition of the strength and contribution of mountain women to the national and international economy. It seeks policy measures that enable mountain women to create a life of dignity for themselves and their communities. It spells out what an enabling environment for health and well-being should be, and it stresses the importance of structures for information dissemination, knowledge sharing, and networking, and the promotion of indigenous knowledge and culture. It hails the entrepreneurial spirit of mountain women and calls for more support for expanding this activity for women.

Raising questions and giving answers is a first step for European mountain women. Working to get structures to work for them is a longer haul. But moving mountains has never been easy, and of all mountain people, women know this best.

Mountain Women: Moving Mountains, Moving Women

By Anita Anand and Ojaswi Josse

(source: Mountain Research and Development Vol. 22, NO. 3, August 2002 (Women in Mountains: Gathering Momentum))

It is 2002, a special year for mountain people. The United Nations proclaimed it the "International Year of Mountains" (IYM). A whole year devoted to issues and concerns of mountain people, and mountain women.

Are these concerns and issues different to people living in the plains? Yes, and no. Women in the mountains and plains face discrimination no matter where they live.

The difference is in the level and their ability to do something about it. Mountain women live in more remote areas, and their challenges are multiplied a hundred times over, compared to their sisters in the plains. Whether it is collecting water, fuel, and

fodder, going to a health centre, or sending a girl child to school — it is that much more difficult. If women in the plains feel that policies ignore their needs, mountain women feel it doubly so.

Mountain women's concerns have been the subject of discussion in at least two important international forums. First, at the UN Conferences on Women and second, at the UN Conferences on Environment and Development. While the first women's conference was held in 1975 and the environment conference in 1972, the issue did not come up proactively on the agenda until the 1980s and 1990s, after the discussion on women and development and then gender and development. From these sprouted many smaller regional, national, and local forums in which greater understanding of mountain women's needs and realities were explored and revealed. The discussions at the macro level filtered down to the micro level, and vice-versa.

Because of this impetus, many things happened. More research and action was activated. Individuals and organisations working in mountain areas began to pay attention to women's specific needs. There is better understanding of mountain women's realities internationally, by region, within nations, and in local communities. And there are renewed efforts to lobby for, and do advocacy for more gender sensitive policies, programmes and opportunities for mountain women.

With the growth of NGOs and civil society organisations and movements, mountain women have access to information and services. While they may not benefit directly and immediately from the services, simply because they are non-existent, knowledge about their existence is a start. Organisations and individuals committed to and passionate about mountain people have been working and serving as important intermediaries to women.

In changing times, mountain women feel the acute need to be financially independent as most men in the communities migrate to the plains. In most cases it is because of the need to search of a living, coupled with harsh mountain conditions, lack of opportunity, and the lure of the plains. Women and children are often left to fend for themselves. Income generation from what is available in their environment has become a crucial issue for women. Knowledge of markets, products, transportation, and how to manage small businesses are very much on the minds of mountain women.

Mountain communities, despite their remoteness, are not immune from change. They go out into the world and the world comes in to them. This means a re-definition of mountain life at many levels: for one, relations between men and women and their roles in and outside the home. With more women taking on roles outside the home (which they were engaged in anyway) and men migrating, who will do which work becomes important. Traditionally, as in all other communities, roles have been gendered. A pressing question for those working on mountain issues is whether these roles be challenged or left

as they are.

The mountains are a storehouse of indigenous knowledge. Medicinal plants, biodiversity, animal products, coffee and tea growing — the list is long. Can mountain women harness these and become managers of their lives and fates? National and international corporations are also keen to exploit mountains of their rich resources. Can women be part of these ventures, or will they lose out to vested interests?

Mountain women's participation in local decision making happens in various ways. Many communities have their own councils, where women are appointed or nominated. In many parts of the world, it seems that they come to these positions by being active in movements to represent women, often related to an income generation activity. Forming cooperatives, syndicates and groups, they get empowered and go on to empower other women. These developments have emerged by promoting activities and schemes whereby women can come together, often to avoid exploitation by middle men (and they are often men), have access to micro-lending and small start up schemes, and so on. In this, women of the plains have worked with their mountain sisters, and the ventures have been a collaborative sharing of skills and knowledge, and many valuable lessons have emerged.

One important forum where some of these developments and findings will be shared is "Celebrating Mountain Women", an international gathering of mountain women, in Thimphu, Bhutan in October 2002. Hosted by the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD) based in Nepal, it will bring together about 250 mountain women, researchers, media professionals, policy makers, NGOs and civil society representatives, and the donor community. A major focus of the gathering will be the sharing of mountain women's lives and how they have been able to empower themselves, their families and communities. Under the theme areas of Natural Resources and Environment, Health and Well-being, Culture and Indigenous Knowledge, Political and Human Rights, Entrepreneurship, and Gender Roles and Responsibilities, the areas of policy, research and practice will be discussed. The Mountain Forum (see box) provides networking linkages to groups of mountain women around the world who are participating in CMW.

The idea of calling it a celebration was deliberate. While mountain women have hard lives, are undoubtedly exploited, discriminated against, and disfranchised, they also have enormous resilience, strength and power. It is the latter aspects that the gathering wishes to capture and take forward. The goal is to empower women as potential agents of their own change, and to expose them, in all their strength and vulnerability, to people and communities are that do not normally witness this side of their personality.

While mountain women are marginalised, there are exceptions. They represent many different ethnic

A growing group of mountain women and their advocates are coming together to voice common concerns through the women's network of the global Mountain Forum. A "Mountain Women" email list was created in 1998, and now serves over 700 subscribers, with the majority coming from developing countries. The Mountain Forum also hosts a dedicated web page for mountain women. <<http://www.mtnforum.org/women/>>, including a calendar of events, an on-line library, and other resources

groups, and are not homogeneous across a geographical region. Customs and customary laws may have favoured a better status for mountain women in the past (such as more involvement in decision-making and access to household assets), as opposed to the women in the plains; but this is changing.

More recently, with the mainstreaming of mountain women and communities being a development norm, the somewhat higher status in certain aspects enjoyed by mountain women is on the slide. Paradoxically, researchers talk about the inaccessibility of mountain areas, but they have not demonstrated this feature when it comes to the spread of practices and norms that marginalise and work against mountain women.

Similar and different

The status of women in the mountain areas varies enormously, even in one region. For example in the Hindu Kush-Himalayan (HKH) region, in the village of Istalif in Afghanistan, the people of the Tajik and Pashtu communities are predominantly Muslim. Their area is very remote; there are no basic amenities, and no transport. Women do work in the home, care for the house, family, kitchen garden, and livestock. Men fetch water and fuelwood, do all the farm work, and cultivate fruit. Men make all the decisions, in and outside the home, and women cannot even decide what to cook. There is almost no education for women and very little for men. Women do not participate in public life, and only meet in seclusion during family and sometimes community events. Many men are absent and inactive due to the depression and/ or war injuries. Women have taken on roles and responsibilities outside the home.

At the other end of the spectrum, in Bhutan, there is no rigid division of labour, but men plough, and women handle manure. Mostly women do household work and childcare, but men also participate in this to an extent. Both market goods, and share community work. Women fetch water. Bartering, marketing, and pastoral work is shared by both sexes. Daughters inherit parental land and property in the north, east, and west. In the south, sons inherit. Women make decisions equally with men.

Girls and boys are given an equal access to education, and the ratio of girls to boys is 1:1. Female literacy levels are low among older women. Rural women participate actively in community and local meetings and are vocal and strong. There are few women in civil service and in visible public positions. Due to urbanisation, mobility, and levels of education, women's workloads have increased, but so has their participation in public life as well as elected local bodies.

To understand the full implication of differences within countries, Nepal presents a good case study. The greatest challenge is limited availability of data, without which it is difficult to make sound policy and programme decisions.

As the distribution of poverty within the country is widespread, it is hard to point out where the poor (and poor women) are concentrated. However, district-wide statistics are available through the Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) and other national sources. A large number of prosperous and well-educated people in the Kathmandu Valley enjoy a fairly high quality of life, which corresponds to medium-income countries of the world. But, in the remote mountainous districts in the Far and Mid Western region, and clusters in the southern fertile plains (known as the Terai), which make up of one-third of the districts, people live in appallingly low standards. An ICIMOD-SNV study showed that overall literacy rate in Kathmandu district is 69 per cent, while in Humla and Kalikot it is less than 20 per cent. Infant mortality is 32 out of 1000 live births in Mustang, while it is 201 in Mugu. The study indicates that child deprivation, gender discrimination, and women's empowerment are more critical in those districts where overall literacy is lower than in those districts where the overall literacy rate is higher. The study points out, among other things, that policy and programme interventions should be in areas with a higher concentration of disadvantaged groups (such as the Terai area), keeping in mind the value of infrastructure (physical and social) in attaining higher levels of development.

Beyond the International Year of Mountains

The process of the development of mountain areas can be nudged along by understanding the vital role that women have played and are playing in their environment. This needs to be based more in the present day reality and context, and solutions must be sought that will empower women.

Although the infrastructure and policies that will empower mountain women may not all be in place, what exists can be harnessed and brought together, so that various interested parties — mountain women and their communities, researchers, entrepreneurs, NGOs, markets, and producers — all work together to make it a success.

The year of mountains provides an excellent opportunity to create a momentum in which women can move mountains, so that the mountains, in turn, can move them.

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Mountain Women on the Agenda

By Anita Anand

Kathmandu, (WFS): Twenty women from Africa, Asia, Europe, as well as Latin and North America concluded a three-day meeting in Kathmandu during which they drafted a two-year plan of action, which they called the "Mountain Women's Agenda".

The meeting proposed an international gathering in May 2002 to be held in Nepal, which will bring together almost 300 participants — mountain women, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), mountain entrepreneurs, researchers, parliamentarians, senior government officials, funding agencies, and media representatives. The participants will be from about 70 countries, representing the world's major mountain ranges, especially the marginalised communities.

The focus of the proposed meeting would be to show the strength and commitment of mountain women in making a positive contribution to local and national economies. Towards this, discussions, activities, and events will highlight and showcase practical aspects of mountain life — stories, songs, dances, foods, crafts, textiles, traditional knowledge, as well as efforts to make constructive change.

The meeting will also address issues of concern such as legal and political rights, health and well-being, conservation of traditional wisdom and natural resources, women's labour and opportunities for entrepreneurship.

The Mountain Women's Agenda will be part of the many activities during 2002, which was designated International Year of Mountains (IYM) by the United Nations resolution in November 1998, based on an initiative from Kyrgyzstan. The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the UN has been appointed the lead agency in collaboration with governments, NGOs, and other UN agencies.

The May 2002 meeting will be organised by a secretariat located at the Nepal-based International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD), and the Mountain Forum, a network founded in 1995 along with its nodes in all regions, active worldwide. The idea for a meeting to focus specifically on women in the IYM was first mooted at a meeting of the Mountain Forum Council in Cusco, Peru last year.

The Action Plan of the Mountain Women's Agenda includes establishing a Steering Committee, selected from the women attending the meeting, which would

guide the work of the secretariat based at ICIMOD. Regional focal points would identify mountain women's groups and build networks. They would prioritise areas for action, and document promising women's initiatives through video, radio, and oral testimonies.

Interactive databases are planned, as well as an e-conference with regional moderators and NGO gateways to bring in marginalised women's voices. The FAO, the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), and the UN Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) South Asia Regional Office, have made financial commitments. ICIMOD and the Steering Committee will be seeking further funds to enable the proposed plan of action to be carried out.

Why an International Year of Mountains? The concern is not new. In the last decade of the 20th century, the UN hosted a series of international conferences, to bring together collective wisdom and concerns on issues facing humankind.

The 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil (or the Earth Summit as it was popularly called), in its final document, Agenda 21, devoted an entire chapter to sustainable mountain development. It highlighted the urgency of action focusing on two areas: generating and strengthening knowledge on the ecology and sustainable development of mountain systems; and promoting integrated watershed development and alternative livelihood opportunities. The FAO was appointed Task Manager of this work.

Three years later, at the UN Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, China, the Platform of Action, the document adopted by 184 countries, also recognised the value and marginalisation of mountain women.

How much of the world is in mountain areas? Cartographic compilations show that 48 per cent of the world's total terrestrial surface lies above 500 metres; 27 per cent above 1000 metres; and 11 per cent above 2000 metres. These mountain areas contain high biological diversity, often of global relevance. They are important centres of crop diversity, a key factor in agriculture.

Several issues of importance arise with regard to mountain areas. Due to the very nature of the terrain, all land-use activities are disadvantaged compared to the lowland, bringing livelihood and environmental problems into centre-stage. Mountains often constitute geographical and political borders and can be sites of conflict, often owing to their natural resources and strategic relevance.

Because of their remoteness and inaccessibility, they are sometimes places of refuge for political opposition groups and fringe movements. The remoteness has enabled protection of areas as well as diversity. But much of this is changing as the outside world comes in closer, through media, traffic with the plains, and lack of paid work. All these changes affect women doubly so.

The 2002 gathering of the Mountain Women's Agenda hopes to provide a platform to discuss all this and more.

March 15, 2003

Women in Virginia, Bhutan Share Common Concerns

By Jessica Fischer

Trekking through the Himalayan mountains and conversing with the prime minister of a remote Asian kingdom are definitely among the highlights of Renda Keith and Anne Leibig's trip to Bhutan last year.

But the realisation that many of the issues they face living in the foothills of the Appalachians are shared by mountain women all over the world was by far the most valuable souvenir they brought home.

"Those women are a lot like us," said Keith, a mother of four who works as a home visitor for the Head Start programme in Dungannon, Va. "They have the same issues about childcare, they have the same issues about making sure their family is provided for. They have the same issues about, 'Am I going to be warm in the winter? Are my kids going to have a good schooling? If they get sick, how is the health care?' It's the same issues, just a different world."

The Scott County, Va., residents travelled halfway around the world to Bhutan, a tiny country nestled in the Himalayan mountains between India and China in October 2002 to attend the "Celebrating Mountain Women" conference sponsored by the United Nations as part of its "International Year of Mountains."

Keith and Leibig joined some 250 other women from 35 countries across the globe at the conference, held in the capital city of Thimpu, as representatives of In Praise of Mountain Women, a non-profit grassroots organisation based in St. Paul, Va.

"We had a big gathering in Abingdon in 1990," Leibig said. "People told their stories, and we talked about things we wanted to do to help make women's lives better. It was such a good event that people said, 'Let's do it again!'"

They've gathered almost every other year since. At a meeting last August, 48 women from five states got together in Abingdon to create a report they asked Keith and Leibig to carry with them to Bhutan. In it, they made suggestions for promoting the continued development of women and their families living in mountain regions. They also brought items expressing life in the Appalachian Mountains, which fabric artist Margaret Gregg of Erwin used to create a five-foot quilted collage banner.

Along with the report and the banner, Keith and Leibig introduced the Celebrating Mountain Women participants to 'the recipe,' a process In Praise of Mountain Women came up with as a way to lend structure and support to meetings of the mind in a nurturing and goal-oriented way.

"Our message of how we do things is as important as what we do," Leibig said. "When I facilitated one of the four workshops we had, my part of facilitating was to help them follow this process."

They also had a chance to showcase their Appalachian ways during the indigenous people's walk. Keith and Leibig wore hiny binders designed by local storyteller Anndrena Belcher and flatfooted to "Wildwood Flower."

"They liked our energy when we went out on stage," Leibig said. "Everybody was cheering, and we were just dancing."

The Scott County women even caught the attention of the prime minister of Bhutan, His Excellency Lyonpo Kinzang Dorji, who was so impressed with the report Keith gave on the Head Start programme in Dungannon that he invited her to return to Bhutan and begin a Head Start programme there — quite an honour, considering the country carefully limits its contacts with the outside world. Only 5594 tourists were allowed into Bhutan in 2002.

"They have been very careful about not letting people from other places come into their country because they want to protect it," Leibig said. "They just recently opened it up to visitors, and as it turns out, this Celebrating Mountain Women event, which was hosted by a group in Nepal through the United Nations, was really the first international conference ever held in Bhutan. They don't really want a whole lot of people to come, so we felt really blessed to be there."

When they weren't busy with conference activities, Keith said she and Leibig got to do lots of sightseeing. They visited the royal palace in Thimpu, took a cab ride through the countryside and played with the local children, who were able to speak English.

Keith, an amateur photographer, documented their experiences, taking almost 70 rolls of film of everything from the monastery at the summit of Tiger's Nest to a 100-year-old lady and her cat.

"All the people I talked to would say, 'Yeah, you can take my picture, but I know I'll never see it,'" she said. "I heard that so much. 'I'll never have it. I'll never get to see it. I've never seen a picture of my children.' I've got thousands of pictures of my children."

Keith decided then and there she would make every effort to get copies of those photos back to the people in Bhutan. To raise the money needed to fund the project, Keith and Leibig are giving slide-show presentations on their trip to groups throughout the area. Their first presentation was at the March 3 meeting of the AT&T Women in Norton.

"It's a way we can raise money and help people learn about a different part of the world," Leibig said. "By us learning about different countries, it's really a way to bring the world more together." Keith and Leibig will also share their story at the next In Praise of Mountain Women gathering in October.

Anyone interested in scheduling a presentation on the Bhutan Photo Project or finding out more about the next In Praise of Mountain Women gathering should call (276) 762-5050 or email khelbert@naxs.net.

Tax-deductible donations may be sent to In Praise of Mountain Women at PO Box 660, St. Paul, Va.,

24283. Cheques should be made out to the Federation of Communities in Service, the fiscal agent for In Praise of Mountain Women.

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