Mountain Population and Employment

Discussion Paper Series

SOCIAL ECOLOGY OF WOMEN'S ROLES IN THE HILLS OF NORTHEAST INDIA

B.K. Roy Burman

MPE Series No.5

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This discussion paper by Professor B.K. Roy Burman is the last in the series of five papers (MPE Series Nos. 1-5) that deal with the role of women in mountain development. The objective of these is to highlight the importance of gender issues which have lately gained some ground in the development dialogue, but are yet far from being internalized in mainstream planning and implementation. This is particularly true in the case of women in the mountains where the harsh realities of a subsistence economy and the fragile high altitude environment, have alienated women from the benefits of mainstream development. Women in the mountains are crucial to the production system. Yet there are several indications, that the changing socio-economic conditions are contributing to greater marginalization of women. This is unacceptable from the standpoint of equity and effectiveness of the production system. The development process needs to recognize this unfortunate state of affairs, make deliberate effort to incorporate gender perspectives, and involve women as active participants in decision making and control. I hope that the publication of the Discussion Papers under KIMDD's Mountain Foundation and Employment Division will shed some light into the complexity of the world that we inhabit.

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FOREWORD

This discussion paper by Professor B.K. Roy Burman is the last in the series of five papers (MPE Series Nos. 1-5) that deal with the role of women in mountain development. The objective of these is to highlight the importance of gender issues which have lately gained some ground in the development dialogue, but are yet far from being internalised in mainstream planning and implementation. This is particularly true in the case of women in the mountains where the harsh realities of a subsistence economy and the fragile high altitude environment, have alienated women from the benefits of mainstream development. Women in the mountains are crucial to the production system. Yet there are several indications, that the changing socio-economic conditions are contributing to greater marginalisation of women. This is unacceptable from the standpoint of equity and effectiveness of the production system. The development process needs to recognise this unfortunate state of affairs, make deliberate efforts to incorporate gender perspectives, and involve women as active participants in decision making and control. I hope that the publication of the Discussion Papers under ICIMOD's Mountain Population and Employment Division will shed some light into the complexity of the tasks that lie ahead.

Professor Roy Burman's paper on the "Social Ecology of Women's Roles in the Hills of Northeast India" is an inquiry into anthropological aspects of women's status and roles in tribal societies. The coverage is quite comprehensive and the diversity of customs and beliefs amongst various tribes is brought out succinctly. The author has emphasized the interrelationship between resources and the cultural ethos which has been the basis of the subsistent economy. Also he describes the new adaptive strategies that are becoming apparent as a response to changing socio-political circumstances. Dr. Roy Burman has also highlighted some misperceptions about the supremacy of women in tribal societies. He argues that succession and inheritance of property are, for example, generally along the male line and women folks have by and large very limited rights over property. At some point, he also states clearly, how the Government policy of privatisation runs contrary to communal systems of ownership, control and management. These and other issues that the author has brought out in the paper are very pertinent to mountain development. After all, tribal societies predominate in the mountains, not only in India but other parts of the Hindu Kush-Himalayan region. These people who have been marginalized in the process of "modernization" deserve to get our primary attention. Professor Roy Burman's paper is very insightful in this respect. I am confident that readers will find it interesting. We hope that you would write to us with your comments and suggestions and join in the discussion on important issues raised by the paper.

Finally, I would like to take the opportunity to thank the Ford Foundation for their generous support to ICIMOD's programme on the "Role of Women in Mountain Development." The grant has made it possible to establish collaboration with relevant institutions in the Hindu Kush-Himalayan Region, engage professionals to conduct case studies, write conceptual papers, publish and disseminate the findings. At ICIMOD, Dr. Deepak Bajracharya, Division Head of Mountain Population and Employment, is the overall Coordinator of the Programme. Thanks are due to Dr. Deepak Bajracharya and Ms. Prabha Thacker for providing professional input in improving the final text of this paper and others in the MPE Series (Nos. 1-5).

E. F. Tacke
Director

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