

Challenges and Opportunities for Women in the Changing Himalayas

Michael Kollmair, Programme Manager/Senior Social Scientist, ICIMOD, mkollmair@icimod.org

The Hindu Kush-Himalayan region is a highly diverse and dynamic area – geographically, biologically, and culturally – and is undergoing rapid change as a result of the impacts of many drivers, especially global socioeconomic change, demographic change, and environmental and climate change. Addressing the issues of women and men for mountain development in this region is thus a complex task not least in terms of the diversity of cultural contexts and national capacities. Mountain

communities are having to adapt their livelihoods and lifestyles to adapt to new challenges and opportunities brought about by the ongoing changes. However, growing economic wealth; increasing integration in global markets; increasing seasonal and permanent migration; changes in values, norms, and livelihoods; changes in land-use patterns; and changes in availability of ecosystem services like water, are reducing the efficiency of the traditional and balanced adaptation mechanisms.



The ability of women and men to adapt to these changes will depend on their capacity to access new technologies and knowledge and to make choices and exercise control over their assets. Men and women cope with these new realities in different ways, but gender inequalities could considerably limit or favour the aptitude to adapt. This compels the use of different strategies to increase the participation of both women and men in development activities and decision-making. These strategies will need to ensure equitable access to and control of economic, social, and political resources within the rapidly changing context. These are the issues that provide the context of this edition of the ICIMOD periodical.

While women in the Hindu Kush-Himalayan region face many challenges, the idea of Himalayan mountain women as victims of a multitude of threats in a remote and isolated world is not completely true; the realities are much more complex. In recent decades, women's lives in the mountains have come much closer to the mainstream with economic growth; policy and development interventions; improved infrastructure; and growing linkages to national, regional, and international markets. As Manjari Mehta shows in her article on the Uttarakhand case study, new employment opportunities, rising education levels, and emerging aspirations mean that the 'village way of life' is often no longer limited to the traditional rural-based existence. Observations from different countries in the Himalayas offer a more nuanced understanding of 'mountain women' that considers the diverse yet similar worlds in which they live. A detailed analysis of mountain poverty in Nepal in the article by Kiran Hunzai, indicates another new and surprising change in Nepal; women-headed households are on average, better off than those headed by men.

Increasing literacy rates are preconditions for and expressions of a fundamental cultural change that brings empowerment and new responsibilities that are linked to democratisation in the region. Women's literacy has increased sharply during the last two decades. In Nepal for example, the literacy rate of young women between 15 and 24 years of age increased from 33 % in 1991 to 73% in 2007 (Table 1). However, in most Himalayan countries there is still a big gap between the literacy rates of women and men. In 2007, 51% of women were literate on average, compared to 71% of men. However, the 'youth literacy rate' gap is smaller, with 71% of women and 81% of men.

Although the population is still growing, demographics in the mountains are changing as families tend to have fewer children, more men migrate for labour, and



more households move permanently to the lowlands. Increased mobility has led to migration from rural to urban areas throughout the Himalayas. Men migrate for employment to big cities, often outside the mountains and, more recently, abroad especially to the Gulf region and Southeast Asia. With many men absent and fewer children, most areas no longer have the workforce needed for labour intensive mountain farming.

Because of male migration and the reduced workforce, women, who already do a disproportionate share, are now doing an ever-increasing portion of the work for agriculture and livelihoods. This phenomenon is referred to as the feminisation of mountain agriculture and livelihoods. In her article on women's assets and rights in the context of the feminisation of agriculture in Asia, Govind Kelkar shows how the traditional systems give women less access, control, and ownership of land and other productive resources. The situation is aggravated when the national support and extension systems are still gender biased in favour of men. Equally, despite their increasing workload, rural women may experience some level of empowerment in the absence of men because they manage small budgets and make household decisions, which have a positive influence on their role in society. For example, Zhang (2002) noted that rural women in China, particularly the younger generation, increasingly control household income and make decisions about the sale of agricultural products, investment, and purchase of large items, such as houses and consumer durables.

Development policy and its implementation has still not acknowledged the fact that women do such a large proportion of the work in mountain agriculture. For example, most extension workers still picture a mountain farmer as a middle-aged man. Often women are not perceived as 'farmers' because they usually are not landowners even if they do much of the farmwork. As Govind Kelkar points out: "In Asia, despite their crucial

role in agriculture, women are largely excluded from training, extension, and irrigation management. The deep-seated social inequalities hinder women's voice in community management and farmers' associations."

Women play a central role in maintaining and improving the wellbeing of their families and the whole society. Yet, they are rarely acknowledged as agents of change with roles and responsibilities, capacities, knowledge, skills, and competencies. Together with men, they manage and use natural resources, such

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as wood, water, and fodder every day. Increasingly, women play leadership roles in formal and informal local networks and organisations, which are not visible to outsiders or taken seriously by men.

In most of the Himalayan region, women are responsible for supplying water and fuel and play a crucial role in food security. Since climate change affects the mountain natural resources and biodiversity that provide water, food, and energy, the depletion of natural resources has particularly negative consequences for women. Women will have to work harder to access these resources with the extinction of some plant species and changes of water sources; this will increase their already heavy workload, but also increase their awareness of changes. Women often appear to be better managers of resources. In another article, Bina Agarwal shows that 'women only' Community Forest User Groups in Nepal impose stricter rules on forest use than groups that are mixed or dominated by men. Conservation and long-term benefits seem to be more important to women than the short-term gains from the extraction of forest resources. Agarwal concludes that "despite receiving much smaller and more degraded forests, all-women groups outperform other groups and show better forest regeneration and improvement in canopy cover."

However, lack of recognition of the contribution of women to mountain societies and their development is seen in development policies and practices that perpetuate unequal access to financial services, property, rights, legal protection, education, information, health, and other economic and social services. Xue Xu gives a good example of how the lack of a gender perspective in national programmes aiming to conserve the fragile ecosystems of the rangelands has contributed

to increasing the already heavy daily burden of women. Yet, these same programmes free men considerably. Gender blind projects can prevent women from participating effectively in making decisions that shape economic, political, and social development. Although women are slowly closing the gender gap, they still lack equal access to education, social services, financial credit, assets, and appropriate technologies to address their basic needs and thus adapt to a quickly changing world.

Conclusion

With increasing national wealth and ongoing socioeconomic development, new norms and values have entered the lives of people in the Himalayas – and old norms and values have changed or been revived. These changes affect men and women differently and create changes in gender relations, status, and expectations. For example, patriarchal family norms and perceptions of 'how a man or woman should be' are changing quickly. The penetration of TV and Internet is introducing new values and norms, or at least raising aspirations. Himalayan 'daughters' are already different to their mothers with their day-to-day realities, hopes, and aspirations diverging widely from those of their elders. These conditions and circumstances suggest that in the years ahead, women's lives could increasingly move in different directions. As the younger generation of men use new possibilities arising from their education and employment, so will the lives of younger women and girls also change drastically in most parts of the region. For a portion of them, their lives will be fundamentally different to those of their mothers and grandmothers.

The articles in this newsletter show that it is nearly impossible to achieve a comprehensive 'regional' overview of gender issues. The parallel and contradicting influences on the lives of people are too diverse to develop a simple overview. However, these glimpses of 'reality' offer insights into the more recent dynamics of gender relationships in the Himalayas. They also show the manifold ways in which mountain communities maintain their resilience, and the fact that their high adaptive capacity is generally based on an increased contribution from mountain women.

There is a growing awareness of the importance of a gendered view on mountain development problems with a specific focus on the generally disadvantaged women. However, despite all the positive developments, women are still not represented well, do not have a fair share of the resources, and are not seen as the important contributors to improved wellbeing in society that they are. This issue needs to be addressed by all those concerned with mountain development.