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Celebrating Mountain Women: Moving Mountains, Moving Women

Anita Anand
Ojaswi Josse

Mountains are the mainstay of local economies, providing valuable resources for livelihoods. But they are not immune to change because mountain people go out into the outside world, and the world comes into their lives. In this context, mountain women face many challenges, for example, those brought about by out-migration of men and young people from their communities, by external commercial interests that exploit mountain resources, and by changes in their roles and responsibilities.

In this International Year of Mountains, a major forum, "Celebrating Mountain Women," aims to support women and highlight their needs and achievements so that these are reflected and integrated in public policy and in decision-making agendas. Several factors are required to ensure that women are an integral part of sustainable mountain development: more mountain-specific and local research; assistance with entrepreneurship, information, and raising awareness of their rights; and networking among mountain women and various development partners.

The impact of change

Mountain women have expressed a great need to be financially independent because most men in their communities migrate to the lowlands, usually in search of a livelihood, because of harsh mountain conditions, lack of opportunity, and the lure of the lowlands. Women and children are often left to fend for themselves. Making a living from what is available in their environment has become a crucial issue for women, and they therefore need to have knowledge of markets, products, transportation, and management of small businesses (Figure 1).

Despite their remoteness, mountain communities are not immune to change, and mountain life is being redefined at many levels. A major area is the relations between men and women and their roles in and outside the home. With more women taking on men's roles and men migrating, there is a change in social interactions as well. As in other communities, roles have traditionally been gendered, and those working on mountain issues need to address a pressing fact: these changes can either inform or be informed by developmental policies and practices.

Entrepreneurship and decision making

Mountains are a storehouse of indigenous knowledge about medicinal plants, biodiversity, animal products, coffee and tea production—the list is long. National and international corporations are keen to exploit the rich mountain resources. Can women participate in these ventures, or will their role in relation to resources be determined by vested interests?

Mountain women's participation in local decision making takes place in various ways. Many communities have their own councils that appoint or nominate women. In many parts of the world, women attain these positions by being active in movements related to activities concerned with generating income. They become empowered by forming cooperatives, syndicates, and other groups, and they go on to empower other women. This is the result of promoting activities and schemes that bring women together so that they can avoid exploitation by mid-



FIGURE 1 An informal adult education class in Nepal, where women have realized the importance of education, and many have made use of the opportunities presented to them by various national and international NGOs working with women. (Photo by Astrid Bjoensen, courtesy of ICIMOD)

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Laxmi Rokaya	Michela Zucca
Laxmi Rokaya is from Dolpo in northwestern Nepal, and her family includes her 3 children. Besides her daily chores she runs a teahouse and is involved in many community activities. She is Chairperson of a community-based organization, the Rainchi Women's Group, which works to empower women in the Phoksundo Village Development Committee in Shey Phoksundo National Park. She motivates local women to help themselves by making available savings and credit activities, income generation, nonformal education, and cultural promotion. A believer in maintaining traditional norms, she is all for enforcing a system of fines for breaking traditional rules of grazing, collection of pasture products, and alcoholism!	Michela Zucca is a mountain woman from Italy who has devoted her life to the cause of women in the Alps. She is trained as an anthropologist and specialized in women's culture in the Alps. She works at the Centre of Alpine Ecology, an Alpine research center with a strong focus on sustainable development in small marginal mountain communities and active involvement of women. Michela organizes training courses to develop women entrepreneurship in the mountains. She is also the founder of the International Network of Mountain Women (INMW) established 8 years ago and the director of a magazine entitled "Identity Signs: People and Nature in the Alps." This magazine has a circulation of 6000 and has a special section for women.
Evarista Crispin	**Nimmo Devi**
Evarista Crispin is a rural, indigenous Aymara mountain woman living in the harsh region surrounding the Sajam, the highest mountain in Bolivia. She is Vice President of the Integrated Centre of Aymara Women of T'ikapani (CIMAT), a grassroots organization founded by union members of Bolivia's most underprivileged ethnic communities, such as the Aymara and the Quechua. Evarista is also a llama and alpaca herder, a producer, an entrepreneur, and a member of the community of alpaca and llama wool producers. She produces "charque," sun dried llama meat, which is sold in the cities of La Paz and Oruro and has recently formed a cooperative to access international markets for this unique product.	Nimmo Devi was born and grew up in a small, remote mountain village in Kullu in the northern Indian state of Himachal Pradesh. She has devoted almost 10 years of her life to working with other mountain women in her area. She has been a community organizer and has formed and trained over 25 women's Credit and Savings groups in the area where she works. The groups do vermicomposting, grow medicinal plants, and extract apricot seed oil for marketing. Nimmo Devi also serves in the *panchayats* (village councils, the third level of local governance in India).

dlemen (often male) and gain access to microlending and small start-up schemes.

Women from the lowlands have worked with their mountain sisters in collaborative ventures where sharing skills and knowledge has produced many valuable lessons. As the brief portraits in the box illustrate, women are highly competent agents of change. Their contribution to sustainable development must be acknowledged and integrated into planning and policy development.

Women during IYM2002

Some of these issues will feature in "Celebrating Mountain Women" (CMW), an international forum of mountain women to be held in Thimphu, Bhutan, in October 2002. Hosted by the Nepal-based International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD), the forum will bring together about 200 mountain women, researchers, media professionals, policymakers, NGOs, and representatives of civil society and the donor community. Sharing life stories and experiences on their empowerment, their families, and their communities will be a major focus of the gathering. Policy, research, and practice will be discussed in 5 areas: natural resources and environment, health and well-being, culture and indigenous knowledge, political and human rights, and entrepreneurship. The Mountain Forum (see the MountainMedia section in this issue) provides networking linkages to groups of mountain women around the world who are participating in CMW.

The idea of calling the forum a celebration was deliberate. Although mountain women have hard lives and are undoubtedly exploited, discriminated against, and disfranchised, they also have enormous resilience, strength, and power. It is these latter aspects that the gathering seeks to capitalize on and advance. The goal is to support women as potential agents of change and let their strengths and their vulnerability, their progress and their setbacks be seen by the world, ie, by people and communities who do not normally witness these aspects.

More recently, with mainstreaming of mountain women and communities becoming a development norm, there have been changes in the status enjoyed by mountain women. Paradoxically, researchers talk about the inaccessibility of mountain areas, but they have not demonstrated this when it comes to the spread of practices and norms that marginalize and work against mountain women.

Similarities and differences: 3 examples

The status of women in mountain areas varies enormously, even within a region. For example in the Hindu Kush–Himalayan (HKH) region, in the village of Istalif in Afghanistan, people of

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FIGURE 2 Tibetan woman in traditional attire. Women such as this one are examples of respect for traditional cultural heritage combined with openness to innovation, qualities that have made them highly competent agents of change. (Photo by Dan Miller, courtesy of ICIMOD)

the Tajik and Pashtu communities are predominantly Muslim. They live in a very remote area with no basic amenities and no transport. Women work at home and care for the house, family, kitchen, garden, and livestock. Men fetch water and wood for fuel, do all the farm work, and cultivate fruit. Men make all the decisions in and outside the home; women cannot even decide what to cook. Women have virtually no education, and men have very little. Women do not participate in public life and only meet in seclusion during family and some community events. Many men are absent or inactive because of economic depression or war injuries. Women have increasingly taken on roles and responsibilities outside the home.

At the other end of the spectrum, in Bhutan there is no rigid division of labor: men plough and women handle manure. Women work mostly in the household and care for the children, but men participate quite a bit, and marketing of goods and community work is shared. Women fetch water. Bartering, marketing, and pastoral work are done by both sexes. Daughters inherit parental land and property in the north, east, and west, whereas sons inherit in the south. Women and men share equally in decision making. Girls and boys are given equal access to education; the ratio of girls to boys enrolled in school is 1:1, although female literacy levels are low among older women. Rural women participate actively in community and local meetings and are highly vocal. There are few women in civil service or visible public positions. Because of urbanization, mobility, and levels of education, women's workloads have increased, but so has their participation in public life and in elected local bodies.

In Nepal, where poverty is widespread, it is hard to identify where the poor (and poor women) are concentrated. But 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 comparable to that in medium-income countries. But in the remote mountainous districts in the far- and mid-western regions and in clusters in the southern fertile plains (known as the Terai), which make up one third of the districts, people have an appallingly low standard of living. A joint study done by ICIMOD and the Dutch Agency for International Development (SNV) showed that the overall literacy rate in Kathmandu district is 69%, whereas in Humla and Kalikot it is less than 20%. Infant mortality is 32 per 1000 live births in Mustang, whereas it is 201 in Mugu. The study indicates that childhood deprivation, gender discrimination, and women's empowerment are more critical in districts where overall literacy is lower than in districts where it is higher, and points out that policy and program interventions should occur in areas with higher concentrations of disadvantaged groups (such as the Terai).

Beyond the International Year of Mountains

The process of development in mountain areas can be furthered by understanding the vital role that women have played and are playing in their environment. This needs to be combined with a search for solutions that will empower women. Although the infrastructure and policies that can empower mountain women may not all be in place, what exists can be harnessed and applied so that the interested parties—mountain women and their communities, researchers, entrepreneurs, NGOs, markets, and producers—work together for success. The International Year of Mountains provides an excellent opportunity to create a momentum that women can use to move mountains, so that the mountains, in turn, can move them.

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