



**THE ROLE OF THE MOUNTAIN PARTNERSHIP
IN PROMOTING GENDER EQUALITY IN MOUNTAIN AREAS**
by
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There is a curious contradiction when we discuss the role of women in sustainable development in mountain regions.

Women play a key role with respect to environmental protection and social and economic development in mountain areas: they are often the primary managers of mountain resources, guardians of biodiversity, and the main actors in terms of agriculture, animal husbandry, fuelwood collection and other small-scale economic activities. Mountain women are keepers of traditional knowledge, custodians of local culture and experts in traditional medicine, but they are also open to new ideas about improving the lives and livelihoods of their communities. Mountain women are also educators and often have the primary responsibility to raise children as the head of their household, especially in cases where mountain men migrate to lowlands and cities in search of jobs, or engage in armed conflicts. All of these factors increase the workload, food insecurity and poverty of mountain women, especially in the developing world.

But all too often mountain women are invisible and their voices go unheard. They rarely participate in decisions affecting the management and use of local resources; they have few if any legal rights, no access to credit, poor access to formal education and health services and limited access to training and extension services. They are constrained by traditions and customary laws, they are victims of domestic violence, arranged marriages, girl marriages, selective abortion and sexual mutilation.

True, mountain women face many of the same challenges that are faced by women throughout the developing world. But the hardships faced by mountain women are intensified by isolated (and often harsh) physical environments and political

marginalization. Despite these glaring inequalities, mountain women in both the developing and developed world are still frequently overlooked in development strategies, programmes and policies.

This first-ever 'Women of the Mountains' Conference, builds on the 'Celebrating Mountain Women' Conference held in Bhutan during the International Year of Mountains in 2002, and marks a significant step in our efforts to reconcile this contradiction and work together to create an environment that offers equal opportunities and rights for women and men, girls and boys and empowers them to be equal partners in mountain development.

This 'Women in the Mountains' Conference is an excellent opportunity for us all - women and men from the highlands and the lowlands - to listen to and learn from mountain people, and to affirm our commitment and turn these words into concrete action.

Our commitment is clear. But as we all know, the promotion of gender equality is not an easy task. We have all experienced difficulties and frustrations raising the interest, awareness and will of policy makers, donors, stakeholders and the general public to gender equality. Indeed, major conferences, side events and panel discussions on gender are often poorly attended, while training and awareness raising programmes within large organizations are often either scarcely attended or, worse, non-existent.

But if social and economic development in mountain areas is going to become a reality, we need to inject new energy, find new language, and identify innovative strategies and approaches to promote awareness and action for gender equality in mountain areas.

How can we work to achieve this? By working in partnership. We can do better and achieve more by working together than working alone. This is the core idea behind the Mountain Partnership, a voluntary alliance of interested countries and organizations committed to improving the lives of mountain people and protecting mountain environments around the world. I believe that the Mountain Partnership can provide a dynamic framework and institutional setting for our collective efforts.

As of today, a total of 143 members in five regions have joined the Mountain Partnership: 47 countries, 15 intergovernmental organizations and 81 major groups

(civil society, NGOs and the private sector). The Mountain Partnership is supported by a small Secretariat - which I coordinate - based at the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) in Rome.

What are members doing? They are confronting and addressing the challenges facing mountain regions by tapping the wealth and diversity of resources, knowledge, information and expertise, from and between one another, in order to stimulate concrete initiatives at all levels that will ensure improved quality of life and environments in the world's mountain regions. Their collaborative activities, known as the 'Partnership Initiatives,' drive the Mountain Partnership. To date, members have identified and are actively engaged in developing eight thematic initiatives (on biodiversity, education, gender, policy and law, research, sustainable agriculture and rural development in mountain regions (or SARD-M), sustainable livelihoods, and watershed management), as well as six regional initiatives (on the Andes, Central America and the Caribbean, Central Asia, East Africa, Europe, and the Hindu Kush Himalaya).

These Partnership Initiatives are not intrinsically 'new'. Rather, they build on events, processes and concrete activities that took place or were started during the International Year of Mountains or before: for example, the SARD-M Initiative is driven by the outcomes of the global conference held in Adelboden, Switzerland, in 2002; while the Watershed Management Initiative has emerged from an extended watershed management review process which was carried out between 2002 and 2003 by FAO, in collaboration with various partners worldwide.

The Mountain Partnership's Gender Initiative, in particular, brings together some of the many member countries, IGOS and major groups, who focus specifically on gender or have gender-related activities. In the context of the Mountain Partnership's Gender Initiative, they are inspired by the conclusions of the Bhutan Conference of 2002; that the promotion of gender equality in mountain areas is a basic human right and a key condition for lasting development.

To date, members of the Gender Initiative have met face-to-face on several occasions. They have prepared a position paper outlining the core areas for potential collaborative action and now plan a second one focussing on the specific situations, conditions and needs of mountain women from different regions in efforts to define the common elements, differences and development trends. This detailed and region-specific information will allow members to better develop well-

defined strategies for addressing gender equality in at both the national and local level.

But this is not all. Education is a prerequisite factor in achieving gender equality. It is reflected in the third Millennium Development Goal: 'to promote gender equality and empower women: eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education preferably by 2005, and at all levels by 2015'. And it was recently re-instated at the annual meeting of the UN Commission on the Status of Women in February this year. As one girl said at that event: "education is one of the most powerful methods of eliminating violence and discrimination against girls". With this in mind, a preliminary concept note has been drafted by Mountain Partnership members - specifically under the guidance of Michela Zucca from the Centre for Alpine Ecology, who is also participating in this Conference - to develop an educational programme on gender equality and sustainable development that would be integrated into the curricula of mountain schools. The Mountain Partnership needs several partners to take this idea forward and develop it into a common future programme - one that is based on concrete outputs from this Conference and could possibly lead to the launch of a global campaign to include a gender perspective in the curricula of mountain schools.

At the Mountain Partnership Secretariat we aim to promote dialogue, further exchange and stimulate better collaboration for and between members. And we are striving to mainstream the gender equality principle throughout all the activities of the Mountain Partnership. Learn about us. Share your experiences, documents and proposals on promoting gender equality with others in our network. Take advantage of our information and communication services and tools - a an extensive three-language web site with an on-line discussion space, a Mountain Calendar of Events, and our monthly newsletter, 'Peak to Peak', which now has over 500 subscribers on 5 continents.

Mountain development is impossible without mountain women. We believe that the sustainable development of mountain areas can only be attained if women and girls are empowered and given full and equal access to education, health, economic, social and political rights. For this, we need to gather strong political support and to work together in partnership to promote women's rights and eradicate any form of discrimination, violence and social, political and economic exclusion. We offer the Mountain Partnership as a platform for dialogue, a framework for action and tool for promoting gender equality in mountains.

ANNEX 1

GENDER ISSUES IN MOUNTAIN AREAS

written by the leading members of the
Gender Initiative of the Mountain Partnership

Introduction

Gender has been identified by members of the Mountain Partnership as one of its thematic initiatives in recognition that a crucial prerequisite for sustainable development is to achieve equal rights, responsibilities and opportunities for women and men, and to take advantage of development opportunities that are often ignored for lack of a gendered focus. The Gender Initiative of the Mountain Partnership has thus been established to promote awareness and activities to mainstream gender in all partnership activities and initiatives, in order to foster equality and thus make development efforts more sustainable. This brief outlines reasons why gender issues are particularly relevant to mountain development, and what the Gender Initiative hopes to achieve.

The need for a gender focus

An absolutely crucial prerequisite for sustainable development with the overall aim of alleviating poverty is to achieve equal rights, responsibilities and opportunities for women and men. Social organisation, land use management, economic activities, etc. in mountain areas are traditionally strongly gendered. On the one hand, this is often not taken sufficiently into account when thinking about development opportunities and needs, and development projects are accordingly socially, culturally and economically inadequate for both women and men, as well as hardly conducive to adaptation of gender relations where they hinder sustainable development. On the other hand, gender roles are often inequitable and detrimental to women. Among other important factors, the challenging environmental conditions in mountains (fragility, harshness of the environment, inaccessibility), and the highly diverse cultures that adapt to such characteristics, have led to a complex web of gendered roles, knowledge, and skills. Rights, opportunities, workloads and tasks of women and men are far from being equal.

The status of mountain women

Women are vital to the sustainability of mountain communities and play a prominent role in agricultural production, resource management and the household. Yet little information exists about the status of women and gender relations in mountain regions. Studies about women typically focus on those in lowland and urban environments, and are absent from most economic and social histories of mountain regions, which are largely written by men.

It is impossible to describe gender relations in all mountain areas of the world without further research on this theme. Every region has its own distinct cultural and environmental characteristics, and yet extensive research is not yet available for most mountain regions of the world, though some work has been completed in the European Alps, Andes and the Hindu Kush-Himalayan region. Further research is urgently needed in all mountain areas of the world.

Inaccessibility is perhaps the greatest influence shaping the lives of mountain inhabitants. And while mountain women face many of the same challenges as women throughout the developing world, the work of women in mountain regions is intensified by altitude, steep terrain and isolation. In addition, many mountain peoples are of indigenous groups that face numerous forms of discrimination and marginalization.

Many women in mountain regions have more freedom of movement, independence in decision-making and higher status than women in lowland areas. This may be due to less rigid religious beliefs, such as those found in indigenous systems, and because of their vital contribution in eking out a living in a harsh mountain environment.

But this higher status is at risk. Whereas inaccessibility has helped to preserve many languages and cultural traditions in mountain regions, mainstream pressures to adopt national cultures now threaten to undermine the central role of women by relegating them to the home and to domestic chores.

Women carry a much heavier workload than men in mountain regions. While women share agricultural and livestock tasks fairly evenly with men, they often have the additional tedious and strenuous work of collecting water, fuelwood and fodder as well as processing food, cooking, and caring for children and the elderly.

But the workload of mountain women is intensified by a number of factors in mountainous regions, including a limited access to resources, an outmigration of men who seek work in lowland areas and environmental degradation. In most cases, mountain women also lack economic independence and have only limited access to markets, health care and education.

The survival of mountain communities requires the absence of men for trading and herding purposes. During these periods, women maintain the farm and household and participate in small trade and income-earning activities. Increasingly, however, the outmigration of men to lowland and urban centres for cash wages leaves women as heads of the household for long periods with only limited access to credit, agricultural extension, and other services.

Who has access and control of resources?

Women seldom hold ownership and tenure rights to land, trees, water and other natural resources. While women contribute most of the labour for agriculture, they rarely have formal control of land or ownership of animals. Mountain women's lack of control over productive resources means they cannot raise collateral for bank loans, and hampers efforts to improve or expand their farm activities and earn cash incomes. Marketing of products is also constrained by women's lack of bargaining skills, exploitation by middlemen, and distance to marketing centres.

Traditionally, most extension services have been devoted to farmers who own land and who are able to obtain credit and invest it in inputs and technological innovations. Since women often lack access to land or other collateral, extension services bypass women. Cultural barriers are important as well - in many societies male extension agents find it difficult to talk with women farmers, and women are discouraged from this work as it requires time away from the family, and traveling to remote areas. This marginalizes the role of women in agricultural production systems by emphasizing high-yielding crop varieties to which women have little access. This also undermines the traditional knowledge women possess about agriculture and resource management which is often extensive, and differs from that of men - a fact that is often overlooked in mountain development projects. Women's knowledge is a valuable resource on which to build strategies for more sustainable livelihoods.

Women are forced to travel greater distances to collect fuel and fodder as a result of diminishing forestry resources and a declining agricultural base. Environmental

degradation in mountain regions also increases the erosion of topsoil, leading to crop failure. The result is growing outmigration, food deficits and incidences of trafficking of mountain women into lowland and urban centres.

Gender, public services and politics

While the number of girls attending school in mountain areas is increasing, their enrolment is considerably lower than of boys. But the enrolment of girls in school does not guarantee their attendance. Frequently, the girls' mothers, who require their help for childcare and domestic chores, are forced to take them out of school.

Health remains a neglected issue in mountain development. While hospitals are accessible in some areas, mountain women generally have less access to medical care, family planning or female doctors.

In the cold climate of high altitude regions, the body metabolizes food faster, so people need higher-calorie diets. Since females often have less access to household resources, women and girls are at greater risk of hunger and poor nutrition.

Most mountain communities lack access to adequate water supplies and proper sanitation facilities, raising the risk of sanitation-related illness. Women, as the primary water carriers and users are in constant contact with polluted water, increasing their vulnerability. Sanitation is also an issue in many mountain schools where there are often no separate toilets for boys and girls; in some cases, this is the reason girls are not sent to school.

Throughout the developing world, women are prevented from full participation in politics because of their lack of education in addition to their heavy workload. However, the number of women voting and taking up community leadership roles in mountain regions is increasing. Still gender biases and other barriers prevent their full participation in decision making in matters that extend beyond the household.

Many women in mountain regions lack self-confidence and feel less important than men. Factors that influence the self-esteem of mountain women include culture, education, interaction with others outside the community and the ability to earn an income, among others. Even in Tibet, where women are commonly described as free spirited and strong willed, women have a lower self-image of themselves than do men.

While government interventions to help rural women are found in many mountain areas, there are significant gaps between the policy goals and local realities. Policies designed outside the community are inappropriate for the local context and many ignore the daily activities of men and women. Sometimes women are too busy to take advantage of health and education services. Frequently, policy directives come without funds, so they become little more than expressions of intent noted on official documents.

The Gender Initiative

Comment [RR1]:

Given the importance of a gender focus for sustainable mountain development and the need for capacity building for gender awareness and skills, this Initiative will advocate for and support mechanisms to integrate gender throughout the Mountain Partnership and in mountain development in general.

The Gender Initiative aims to enhance the understanding of mountain-specific gender issues. This will be accomplished through the exchange of information and experience, and through the provision of advisory support for activities that have a gender-sensitive approach, on a demand basis. Organizations and individuals with interest in gender issues in mountain regions are welcome to join us. Please visit www.mountainpartnership/initiatives/gender.html for more information.

ANNEX 2

GENDER INITIATIVE of the MOUNTAIN PARTNERSHIP

Members (39)

Leading Members (4)

International organizations: International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD). Major groups: Centre for Alpine Ecology, Swat Youth Front, Women Organising for Change in Agriculture and NRM (WOCAN)

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