

Katie Pontsler  
Period 3

## Women of the Mountains: Past and Present (What can we learn from these brave souls?)

A woman of the mountains is a hearty breed of person who has learned to survive and even thrive in harsh of conditions, yet is also loving and resourceful in these adversities. Living in mountains areas can be hazardous for anyone, but especially for women. This is often exacerbated many fold if their husband or family has left or died, forcing them to live on their own. Although there are differences between modern women of the mountains and more historical figures, the trials endured and solutions to these challenges are surprisingly similar. Examining how women of the mountainous area in the eastern part of the United States were able to live, both the past and present, despite the differences of the times, may give us insight in to how we too can be resilient in difficult circumstances.

Historically, an unmarried or solitary woman was not only considered a burden to her family, but also as a disgrace because they were considered weak and unable to take care of themselves. The book Cold Mountain, by Charles Frazier, is a historical novel based on the true stories of people in the mountains of North Carolina. The main character, Ida May is left by the man she loved to go fight in the United States Civil War for the South. Her father had died and she was forced to take care of the land by herself. She failed miserably and lost all of her crops because she was not skilled nor knowledgeable about farming. The land and house were on the verge of being a total loss due to debt. She faced abject poverty because inflation ran rampant and her father's bank

investments soon became worthless. Being a woman of the mountains, she fought back and learned to survive.

Gaining friends and a support group was often key to survival. During the harsh first winter, she had friends who occasionally gave her food because she had none. Eventually she befriended a young lady named Ruby who helped her take care of the farm. These two strong women banded together and they were able to get through the winter, although it meant selling many of their possessions, including Ida May's Beloved piano. Throughout their journey together, they had to learn had to make traps to keep people and animals out of their food supplies, how to kill and cook animals, how to handle a gun, how to farm, plow, build fences, mend roofs, and many other everyday struggles of that time which would normally be done by men. Other women in the area could not handle this kind of abandonment and, in struggling to survive, turned to prostitution. The challenges were hardly over even with the acquisition of these new skills. Often soldiers or other people would invade their homes looking for food or even more evil intent. (Cold Mountain 1997) For women of the mountains, life is not just about learning to survive, but also dealing with children, sickness, and finances while taking on all of the other responsibilities of life.

Today women in many countries face similar problems that mountain women in the 19th century faced in the United States, whether or not they live in the mountains. Our eyes only need to look south of the border to Mexico and much of Latin America

where many of the men have left their families to seek fortune in the U.S. or other areas to support their homes. The women are left to care for the home and family, often with little to no support from their husbands. Sometimes women and even children turn to prostitution for a source of money, drugs, and food. Surprisingly, many of these young adults are proud of themselves for being able to support themselves without begging or wandering from house to house looking for someone to help them. (Zalwango et al., 2010) Occasionally, women will take employment at bars or nightclubs, but find themselves sexually exploited by men. When asked how women got into prostitution, many women in urban Uganda replied that they enter the profession “through marital separation and the need to support children via rural-urban migration to obtain wage work in Kampala.” (Zalwango et al., 2010) The money these women got from prostitution and other jobs helped to pay to feed their families, pay for school fees, and their rent. However, for every woman who chose this path, there are dozens to find alternate ways to make a living through their own resourcefulness and fortitude, earning them the same designation of women of the mountains, whether or not they actually lived a mountainous area. Many women learn to band together for their common good, forming their own unique communities and support systems. Many times these lead to multigenerational households comprised of adult women and children. They learn to survive and take care of themselves in difficult circumstances. Living on the edge does have other consequences such as dealing with sickness and maintaining health.

Women of the mountains are usually not affluent, but learn to make a living on the edge of poverty. One consequence to poverty is access to adequate health care. No

matter where you live in the United States, there are antibiotics and physicians to help, however all of this comes at a price and many people cannot afford the cost of medicine. Earlier in this century, women of the mountains learned to care for the sick. In many areas of the world, access to affordable and reliable health care is not available. (Hope for the Living Dead 2002) They too must learn to care for the sick on their own. In Africa, the stigma of HIV has led husbands to leave their wives and families believing that the disease is a curse brought by the woman. He fears the disease, even though it was often him who gave her the virus, and refuses to acknowledge his own culpability. Often women of the communities band together to scratch out an existence through mutual support and cooperation rather than dependency. They may have an illness, but they love their children and want a better life, however, HIV is incurable and death is always the end result. As a consequence, women of the mountains must learn to deal with death as a way of life.

In The Mountains of our Mind (2003) by Bob Mckerbow, the author relates how people who live in the mountains of Afghanistan, where there is a war going on, are struggling and dealing with their dead family. The war is costing them so much more than just money, but their livelihoods and even lives. Many people can barely go from place to place without fear of death. One poem in the book describes how a family is dealing with the death of their little boy. The mother is cleaning out a grave with her tears and water while the father is selling items to help pay for their one month year old daughter. It goes on to talk about other people who knew him and how their lives used to be without bullets and guns all around them.

Another poem was written about the women of the area that describes the people trying to do their best on their own and through all the war going on. They try to sell gum and books or try to sew, clean, wash, and even nurse baby to get money to survive. It goes on to describe that to pay for their father's debt some children are placed into prostitution. (Mckerbow 2003) However, even then they are often left with nothing. Soon enough women may find a baby on her left hip and a teenage boy in her right hand while running from the machine guns trying to get away from war and death. Such was seen during the civil war in our own country where many women were left to tend the home and farm while the men were out with the army. Today, women of the mountains must learn to deal with adversity, even war, while surviving and protecting their families.

Some people might say that women of the mountains don't have it any harder than anyone else. Wherever there is poverty, there will be hardship and problems. However, the women in these areas have special problems because they often lack the support system of family that exists for city dwellers. They also lived in more extreme climates, in more isolated conditions, and with less resources than could be found in the cities. The options are fewer, therefore they learned to make do, mend, or go without. This is what distinguishes women of the mountains from others.

A woman of the mountains is an example of the strength of women everywhere. The resilience of these proud individuals in the face of poverty, illness, war, and other adverse circumstances can give us hope in the face of tragedy. In the place of despair,

they show hope and in the place of defeat, they find a way to survive. Many women around the world live in difficult conditions, similar to the mountain women of the United States. Although things may be better in the United States for women who live in Mountainous regions than in the past, there are still challenges to overcome, and things have not changed for many women around the world. Perhaps it is our responsibility to go help women of the world to learn to live in dignity and hope, whether or not they have a man at their side. Opportunity, education, and resources are all that is needed to help these brave women succeed. We can take the triumph of human spirit shown by these women and apply it to our own circumstances and maybe, just maybe, we can make the world a little better for those who come after us. We can all be a woman of the mountains in our own special way.

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