

Role of Mountain Women towards Sustainable Development

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Abstract

With the advent of Globalization, climatic arena of the mountains is fast changing in today's world. In this changing scenario of development, Amrita argues that women's participation is crucial towards the achievement of sustainable development. She shows that Mountain Women play a major role in the conservation of natural resources by highlighting its optimum use. She further emphasizes the empowerment of their role in decision making processes in the development of policy and the implementation of its guidelines.

Keywords: Mountain Women, Sustainable Development, Decision Making Process.

Introduction

Mountain, Development and Sustainability together refers to an international, multidisciplinary aspect of the environmental impacts on socio-economic development.¹ Concerned with the complex interactions between development and environment, the purpose is to identify ways and means for achieving sustainability in all human activities. When we think about such an interaction at global perspectives, a question comes into our mind. Whom do we find responsible in maintaining the sustainability of mountain economy? The answer comes very naturally that it is mostly the women.² The Himalayan mountain eco-system is one in which, many of the roles of women are visible and easily observable.

A short fieldwork was conducted with a focus on women's role in natural resource management. The present study examines the general role of women within mountain systems and the specific ways in which women differ in their use and management of village commons. The differences in women's experiences are important for understanding the complexity of interaction in social and environmental dynamics. These differences also help to understand the differential structures that create diverse and unequal use and management of natural resources or the "political economy" of natural resources management.³

1 J.Bandyopadhyay & D. Gyawali, Himalayan water resources: Ecological and political aspects of management. *Mountain Research and Development*, Vol. 14, No. 1, 1994, pp. 1-24.

2 Prakash Chandra Tiwar, 'The Burning Issue of Forest Resource Degradation and its Impact on Women in the Himalayan Mountain Ecosystem,' in *Man, Nature and Society*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 1999.

3 R.K. Maikhuri, K.S. Rao & K.G. Saxena, "Traditional Crop Diversity for Sustainable Development of Central Himalayan Agro-ecosystems," *International Journal of Sustainable Development and World Ecology*, Vol. 3, 1996, 8-31.

Mountain Women and Sustainable Development

Women play a vital part in the mountainous region of India. Women and mountain however share an intricate relationship. Since women are the ultimate users of natural resources, their contribution in promoting sustainable use is most important. Mountain women attach religious significance in preserving mountain environment. Mountain women have high practical experiences and managerial skills to make optimum use of natural resources. Their contribution in preserving the indigenous culture is also important in the study of mountain culture. "We don't need to be taught about fodder and fuel wood. We learn that from time we learn to walk and carry a small load." Women are very hard workers in the mountain region. They toil through the day, starting with the family works, nurturing children and livestock, going out for fodder, fuel, drinking water and NTPF collection for sustaining livelihood.⁴

Environmental degradation and destruction has weakened the women, who are considered to be the backbone of mountain economy. Due to fast depletion of forest, women has to cover 3000 to 4000kms distance in a year in search of fodder, fuel and water. The depleting forest and natural resources, and introduction of cash crops have affected women adversely by increasing their workload in the mountains. It thus appears that the principal victims of such an environmental degradation are the women, living in and around mountains.⁵

Mountain development has gained considerable attention globally in the development sphere after the needs of the mountain communities were recognized in the Agenda 21, chapter 13 (Fragile Mountain Environments). Mountain communities are undoubtedly rich in terms of bio-cultural diversity, but yet they remain deprived compared to the surrounding lowlands. With the advent of globalization although India has become one of the fastest growing economies in the South-Asian region, yet it has one of the highest poverty ratios. Therefore, careful planning for sustainable development is crucial in lieu of the possibility of the mountain livelihoods being endangered.

Vulnerabilities for Mountain Women

The vulnerabilities for mountain women in the mountain community are vast. Mountain women face more hardships than their male counterparts. Despite their contribution, mountain women remain as marginalized gender of the marginalized mountain areas and thus face double marginalization. They do not participate in decision making process; suffer from ethnic recognition, environmental degradation and negligible development of gender. The triple role of women in production, reproduction and development shows the excessive workload of mountain women. They also lack the access to health services, medicines and health posts, which further

4 "Her Way Forward, Voices of Mountain Women...", Kathmandu, ICIMOD, 2002.

5 M. Mehta, Gender and Disasters Report Draft, ICIMOD, 2007.

aggravates their condition.⁶ Patriarchy plays a significant role in increasing disparity. The state laws and policies are blind towards the issues of gender equality. Men migration on one hand has given more power in the hand of mountain women, which indirectly improves women's leadership. On the other hand, workload has increased with more decision making roles. The armed conflicts in the Himalayan regions have exacerbated gender inequalities. Armed conflict has resulted into migration, and is a serious threat to women's right and freedom. Mountains are threatened by disaster and natural calamities, whose worst victims are women. Due to lack of preparedness, lack of information and exposure, women constitutes the highest number of casualties and death. Women face varied challenges in the post disaster phase such as physical, mental and sexual violence.

Empowerment of Mountain Women in the Decision making process

Necessities and circumstances induce women to take up the new role as the head of the household and shoulder the burden of the economy in order to safeguard traditional cultures of the mountain environments. Exposure to government offices, development organization and to visitors, thereby necessitates women to take up different roles in the sustainable process.⁷ Women realize their hidden potentials and strength to cope up with circumstances. This automatically gives them a decision-making power, changes women's confidence and empowerment. Finally, it has been proved that sustainable development cannot be achieved without full integration of women in resource management. In this connection, the Mahila Mandal President, Shnag Village noted that, "this is our property. If no one protects, the future is not certain".⁸

Literatures on the Chipko Movement suggest that" women in hill agricultural system play important roles not only in the form of main labor of the system, but also in the protection of forest resources. The Chipko Movement was established predominantly as women's fight against the destruction of village forest. It is claimed that a Chipko acts to change the traditional social structure of gender oppression. The Chipko Movement may also be treated as an "Environmental Movement". There is however no doubt regarding the mobilization of by the Chipko in response to the threats towards the environment. Once this movement was spread among many villages of central Himalayan region, Mahila Mandal Dals (village level women groups) have taken initiative to regenerate the forest by planting trees and protecting

6 B. Pradhan & K. Rankin, "Conceptual Perspectives on Women's Role in Mountain Resource Management and Perspectives on the Role of Women in Mountain Development", MPE Series No. 1, ICIMOD, Kathmandu, 1990.

7 Quisumbing R. Agnes, Brown R. Lynn, Haddad Lawrence, and Meinzen-Dick Ruth, "The Importance of Gender Issues for Environmentally and Socially Sustainable Rural Development", in Ernst Lutz (ed.), *Agriculture and The Environment: Perspectives on Sustainable Rural Development*, Washington DC, The World Bank, 1998.

8 Heidi Kaspar, "I am the Household head now! Gender aspects of Out migration for labour in Nepal", Nepal Institute for Development Studies (NIDS), NCCR, Kathmandu, 2005.

them.⁹ Mahila Mandal is an organization found throughout India, existing for decades. It has the official support of the forest Department to enforce local control over village forest. As it is stated in the 1979 annual review of Mahila Mandal, the aim is to "draw rural women into the mainstream of development and to enable them to function as instruments of social change by providing them with programs in which they will have stake or sustained interest such as improving their income or productivity and employability or employment."

Sustainable Livelihoods through Natural Resource Management

Mountain Women are aware about the existence of biological diversity. Efforts should therefore be made to strengthen the awareness by providing training for income generation activities, using natural resource management. Unfortunately, mountain women do not possess the status of a farmer. If these women are given such a status they will acquire right over their land which in turn will go a long way in empowering their status. Enhancing social security for these women and management of natural resources, medicinal plant cultivation etc...can enhance employment opportunities both for men and women in this region. The aim is to improve the socio economic condition for women, by utilizing indigenous natural resources with the belief that sustainable development is possible only through grass root empowerment of the area. With varied bio-diversity, the following natural resources have been identified for long term sustainable livelihoods:

- Organic Farming
- Medicinal Plants Cultivation
- Horticulture
- Bamboo Cultivation
- Floriculture

It is proven by different scientific studies that organic farming leads to increase in biodiversity and its conservation. Navdanya has proven through its intervention in thirteen states of India that, biodiversity based organic farming is the only way to improve the livelihood of women in Uttarakhand. Mountains are considered to be the home of valuable medicinal plants. So far, 1748 medicinal plant species have been documented from Indian Himalayas.¹⁰ On the region scale, maximum medicinal plants have been documented from Uttarakhand, followed by Sikkim and North Bengal. Medicinal plant cultivation can be a suitable alternative for income generation opportunities among women. This region can also be utilized by horticulturist. Bamboo cultivation and floriculture can also be used to encourage the women to intensify biodiversity, which would lead to higher productivity and higher income.

9 Prasanna K. Samah, Pitamber P. Dhyani, Gender in the management of indigenous knowledge: reflections from Indian Central Himalaya, 2006.

10 S.S. Samant, U. Dhar & L.M.S. Palni, "Medicinal Plants of Indian Himalaya: Diversity Distribution Potential Values.", G.B. Pant Institute of Himalayan Environment and Development, Almora, 1998.

Policy Implementation

In the state policies, the issues of gender equality do not get a proper focus. Government policies have never given recognition to mountain women regarding policy training or program implementation. Women have never raised their voice against it. Mountain women, who give more toil, rarely own their land or make the policy decisions that affect their lives. The women belonging to the Hindukush Himalayas of Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, India, Myanmar, Nepal and Pakistan share similar status. Bhutan and Myanmar shows high degree of gender equality than other countries. Today various act and policies are being formulated by the Government which provides attention and recognition to the mountain women.¹¹ The government should however be pressurized to include women's participation in decision making process. Policies to provide education, training, new technologies to reduce their work load and increase their exposure to the outside world, would lead to women development and thereby facilitate sustainable development in the mountain economy.

Conclusion

Women are central to all kind of development in the economy. Their contributions cannot be overlooked. The paper attempted to throw light on women's participation in the sustainable development of mountain economy.¹² Sustainable development means an 'ongoing' development process. To continue the process of development the backbone of the economy cannot be paralyzed, rather it has to be made strong. In spite of different kind of barriers like poverty, environmental degradation, gender inequality, armed conflicts etc. mountain women continue to play a unique role in the process of development. Mountain Women should be given the status of a main worker. Women groups like the Mahila Mandal should be promoted and given proper recognition by the Government. The role of NGOs as catalysts and intermediaries therefore needs to be encouraged, and the support of the government to this end is very vital. The complementarity's in the functioning of NGOs and government agencies need to be identified and acted upon.¹³ The sustainable livelihood programs such as, alternative income generation option should be made more popular among women. Women's integration into environmental initiatives builds sustainability across many sectors, and may be strengthened by providing a common international platform to air their views.

11 UNCED (United Nations Conference on Environment and Development), Agenda 21. Rio de Janeiro, 1992.

12 UNESCO, Impact of Human Activities on Mountain and Tundra Ecosystems. Programme on Man and the Biosphere (MAB) Project 6, Final Report, Paris, 1974, pp. 132.

13 E. Cecelski & D. Bajracharya, "Energy, Environment, and Women in Mountain Areas." in D. Bajracharya et al., *Women and the Management of Energy, Forests, and Other Resources*, MPE Series No. 3, ICIMOD, Kathmandu, 1993.