

## **Brief on Gender in Mountain Areas**

Mountain people rank amongst the most deprived of the world's population, and yet, as is well recognized, their stewardship of mountain natural resources is closely linked to the sustainability of life in lowland areas. Mountain women play a crucial, and in many respects dominant role in natural resource management, agricultural production and the well-being and very survival of mountain families, 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. Diminishing forest and agricultural resources force them to travel greater distances to collect fuel, fodder and water and increase food insecurity, poverty and trafficking of mountain women into lowland and urban centres. In most cases, mountain women also lack economic independence and have only limited access to health care and education.

Yet, despite their dominant role in production systems of the mountains, relatively little information exists on the situation of mountain women and on gender relations in mountain regions - studies on the status of women in the countries of mountainous regions focus on women from lowland and urban environments.

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. Strategies of survival have always included the frequent absences of males for trading and herding purposes, and women have traditionally held responsibility for the maintenance of the farm and household in the absence of their men folk and participated in small-scale trading and income-earning activities as well.

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.

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 development services.

As a member of the Adelboden Group Bureau for the Major Group Women, WOCAN advocates for mountain women's issues in this voluntary body of mountain advocates affiliated with the SARD Mountain Project of the UN Food and Agriculture Organization. WOCAN is also a Lead Member of the Gender Initiative of the Mountain Partnership - a voluntary alliance of partners dedicated to improving the lives of mountain people and protecting mountain environments whose secretariat is at the FAO.

For more information:

- Gender Issues in Mountain Areas: <http://www.mountainpartnership.org/issues/gender.html>
- Gender and Mountain Development: [http://www.icimod.org/focus/gender/gender\\_links.htm](http://www.icimod.org/focus/gender/gender_links.htm)
- Celebrating Mountain Women: [http://www.icimod.org/iym2002/cmw/cmw\\_brc.htm](http://www.icimod.org/iym2002/cmw/cmw_brc.htm)