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SUSTAINABLE MOUNTAIN DEVELOPMENT

Mountain women's future



The life of an elderly woman living on subsistence farming in a hazard-prone valley in Georgia differs considerably from that of an educated young female labourer working at an export-oriented horticultural farm in the highlands of Kenya. There is no one typical “mountain woman”. Yet, despite very diverse livelihood prospects, many mountain women around the world share a similar position in society. Compared with men, they suffer from disproportionately long working hours, limited access to resources, unequal land rights and low participation in decision-making – inequalities that make them more vulnerable to poverty.

The situation of women and girls worldwide has generally improved – no doubt a result of 40 years of concerted gender mainstreaming efforts. But progress has been much slower than average in the poorest population segments and in remote areas, including mountain regions. Poverty in many mountain regions remains widespread, although unevenly; women are particularly affected. The United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development offers fresh leverage for transforming mountain women’s situation on behalf of a more equitable and sustainable future.



This woman in Wangdue, Bhutan, is cleaning dishes after a short break from work. (Photo by Heidi Liedler Frank; © ADA)

Mountain women’s diverse realities ...

... are linked to the quality of mountain ecosystems

As much as 70 percent of people in mountain regions still live in rural areas, and the share of women is even larger due to the high outmigration of mainly young men [3]. Accordingly, women’s livelihoods and their daily work and practices in mountains are predominately shaped by rural mountain contexts and – albeit to different degrees – by small-scale agricultural activities and livestock husbandry. The three Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) targets that deliberately aim at promoting the conservation and sustainable use of mountain ecosystems (targets 6.6, 15.1 and 15.4) are thus crucial for rural mountain women’s livelihoods and well-being [2]. A healthy environment provides them with vital ecosystem services such as freshwater, food from a diversity of crops and non-timber forest products, medicinal plants, timber, energy and protection against natural hazards.

But rural mountain women not only benefit from healthy mountain environments. They also play a considerable role in safeguarding mountain ecosystem services [4]. Mountain women and men have developed a multitude of strategies to manage the diverse but often limited natural resources, and to cope with the rugged topography, difficult accessibility and, in some areas, harsh weather conditions. They purposefully share roles, responsibilities and workloads related to maintaining their rural livelihoods, and in doing so, mountain women perform many tasks that help to conserve natural resources.

... are shaped by unequal relationships with men

Prevailing power relations between men and women often lead to unequal sharing of burdens, benefits and opportunities for individual development. A majority of women in mountains suffer from discrimination in the form of unequal rights and access to natural and financial resources. Yet in some mountain areas, thanks to customs and special institutions, women have enjoyed greater freedom and independence in decision-making than many women in the lowlands.

Despite the gender mainstreaming efforts of governments, non-governmental organizations, international organizations and donors such as the Austrian Development Agency or the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, gender equality in mountains is far from being achieved (see example of Georgia in Box 1). This is also confirmed by the Global Gender Gap Index [5] and the Social Institutions and Gender Index [6] of mountain countries like Bolivia, Bhutan, Rwanda and Armenia. Equality in primary education for girls and boys has nearly been achieved, probably thanks to Millennium Development Goal 3. But gender gaps in political and economic participation remain considerable, although they differ greatly depending on country-specific cultural, social, institutional and economic factors. Rwanda ranks surprisingly high in the Global Gender Gap Index – fifth out of 144 countries – while Armenia and Bhutan are among the 20 lowest-ranking countries (Figure 1). However, the picture changes completely when we have a closer look at discrimination within families and violence against women.



Figure 1: Global Gender Gap Index scores and ranks of four countries with a high share of people living in mountains. The World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report quantifies the magnitude of gender disparities and tracks their progress over time, focusing on the relative gaps between women and men across four key areas: health, education, economic and political empowerment. The 2016 edition covers 144 countries. A score of 0 means parity, a score of 1 means parity. Source: [5]

This is reflected in the Social Institutions and Gender Index, which indicates that women in Bolivia and Bhutan suffer significantly less harassment than women in Rwanda and Armenia. Overall, this evidence of diverse but persistent gender disparities in mountain regions underlines the urgency of SDG 5: to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls.

Critical gender issues

Global indices only provide a rough overall indication of mountain women's situation. They do not reflect their realities, which may differ from one valley to the next and from one social group to the other. Consistent, sex-disaggregated data are generally hard to come by, and in mountain regions even more so. In their absence, we must resort to insights from a growing body of case studies to provide a more detailed account of the specific challenges facing women in mountains, especially in rural areas.

Distinct roles and uneven workload

Social, institutional, ethnic and religious factors, but also marital status and age define women's status and responsibilities within their mountain societies and their families. The same factors also determine women's and girls' bargaining power with men and boys regarding their respective roles, responsibilities and workloads. Traditionally, household chores – including water, fuelwood and fodder collection – and care work are mainly female tasks, while activities relating to the cash economy and off-farm activities fall within men's realm. Although work in agriculture and livestock husbandry is shared [8], women usually

BOX 1 Gender assessment in Georgia

Although gender equality is promoted in numerous laws, policies and strategies, a detailed gender assessment reveals challenges. Among others:

- **Gender equality remains insufficiently mainstreamed.** There is a lack of synergy between gender equality policies and sectoral development policies, of gender-sensitive outreach strategies and of sex-disaggregated data, and gender equality is insufficiently understood.
- **Social barriers and unpaid work prevent women from accessing benefits from income-generating agricultural business.** Women invest 80 days more than men in agricultural work and are their families' primary caregivers. This type of work is often unpaid and unrecognized.
- **Existing gender stereotypes make it difficult for women to participate in planning and decision-making at all levels.** Women are less informed and participate less in local community meetings.

The authors' recommendations include:

- **Strengthening gender mainstreaming**, for example by means of a strong and well-positioned inter-sectoral institutional mechanism, gender analysis of policies, and promotion of local gender advisers.
- **Addressing gender stereotypes** by raising awareness of the benefits gender equality offers women and men, and by promoting women's and girls' education in the agricultural sector.

Source: [7]

work longer days than men. The daily routines of female and male herders in the highlands of Sichuan are a telling example (Figure 2). In addition, ecosystem degradation is forcing women to cover longer and longer distances to fetch water, fuelwood, herbal medicines and fodder. In combination with the rugged mountain topography, this adds considerably to women's drudgery [9].

Interventions that disregard the power relations between women and men will only defer the problem, rather than solving it. There are many

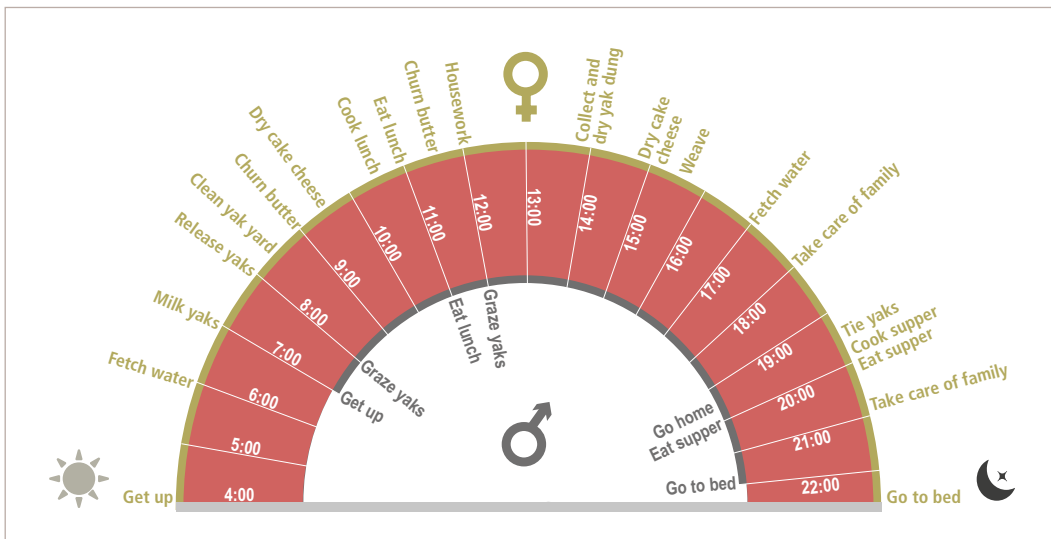


Figure 2: Daily workload of pastoral women and men in Sichuan, China. Source: Unpublished study by Tingyu et al., as cited in [13]

accounts of how well-meant gender projects failed as the relief they meant to offer women led to a shift in workloads that again benefitted men – or, even worse, restricted women’s social opportunities and increased men’s control over their time [10, 11]. The installation of water pumps in Northwest India, for example, was intended to ease women’s workload; instead, it ended up increasing their burden as men discovered the joys of bathing and asked women to carry the water for them [12].

Traditional knowledge under pressure

Women’s practices and activities differ from those of men. Accordingly, women have developed specific knowledge about their mountain environment and skills related to its management. This enables them, for example, to take advantage of the high biodiversity to diversify their diet, and to adapt to changing environmental conditions. In Bolivia, women’s traditional knowledge helps them to select the most appropriate plant species in times of drought and other environmental stresses [14]. Women’s outstanding knowledge and skills could strengthen their position and should make them key actors in decision-making. But environmental changes, including rapid loss of biodiversity, as well as social change driven by globalization may reduce the relevance of traditional female skills and require new and different types of knowledge that women no longer have.

Limited land rights and access to resources

Land rights are an important source of assertiveness and a critical determinant of prosperity, social status and political power. People who lack reliable access to land, natural and financial resources, or who have no secure land rights, risk being caught in a poverty trap. Women’s access to land often depends on their marital status. Divorce, legal separation or widowhood may mean that they lose essential natural livelihood assets or even their social status [15]. This poses a particular challenge in mountain regions affected by male outmigration.

Ensuring equality in resource tenure and titling is expected to increase women’s participation in household decision-making, their access to loans and to knowledge, their sense of security and their self-esteem. Rwanda [16] and Ethiopia [17] are among the countries where women have the right to own, buy, sell and inherit land. In 2012, 11 percent of land in Rwanda was legally owned by women alone and 83 percent jointly by married couples [16]. The downside of initiatives to secure land tenure for individuals is the associated risk of losing common-pool land resources, which are often crucial to women’s livelihood strategies.

Low participation in decision-making

Mountain women can influence their well-being by participating actively and influencing decision-making in grassroots committees as well as governments at all levels. Nevertheless, women are still under-represented as advocates, voters and decision-makers – even when there are no statutory restrictions. Barriers to participation include stereotypes, culturally prescribed domestic roles, low voter education and personal obstacles such as lack of confidence [18]. Even when women do become members of decision-making bodies, social and cultural circumstances often make it difficult for them to articulate their concerns [19]. Other hindrances experienced by mountain women are their physical absence in decision-making processes due to family care tasks, restricted freedom of movement and remoteness. Nepal’s community forestry initiative has proved successful in terms of women’s social and economic integration: It has raised the average share of women in forest user group executive committees to 25 percent [20], and in some districts the share is as high as 40 percent [19]. However, research has revealed that women’s actual participation in decision-making remains rather low and the glass ceiling is still firmly in place. Even in communities with high male outmigration, the committee chair is held by one of the few remaining men [19].

Remoteness and restricted freedom of movement

The remoteness and difficult accessibility of settlements, including the scattered camps of nomads, result in exclusion from politics, markets and public services [21, 13]. In the case of women, exclusion due to physical barriers is often aggravated by discriminatory cultural norms and social restrictions that further limit their freedom of movement [22]. Women's limited access to health care, information, education, the labour market and politics increases the risks of poor health and poverty not only for the women themselves, but also for their children. In Peru, despite growing numbers of girls attending school, young people still feel that women have less access to education than men; many parents keep their girls at home for fear of teenage pregnancy and loss of domestic support [23].

Dynamic change brings both opportunities and threats

Worldwide developments such as globalization, modernization, climate change and growing pressure on land affect the lives of mountain women and men, too. Many of them find their tailor-made livelihood strategies increasingly inadequate to cope with change and meet their needs. But global change can also open up new opportunities.

Migration, urbanization and remittances

Migration to urban centres and abroad has become an important part of income diversification in many mountain areas worldwide. Migrants and their families anticipate and respond to limitations and declining mountain livelihoods. Migration is also a means of accessing higher education. However, the rate of urbanization differs significantly between regions: In Africa, only 16 percent of mountain people live in urban centres [1], whereas this share has reached as much as 67 percent in South America [3]. Outmigration is still mostly male-dominated, although in some areas young women are catching up. In Nepal, out of the 7 percent of people who migrated in 2011, 88 percent were men [24]. In the Hunza region of Pakistan, 76 percent of surveyed households reported that one or more household members had left the valley for employment or education; 99 percent of these migrants were men [25].

The impacts of migration on the families left behind are very diverse and include both positive and negative effects. The feminization of mountain agriculture has increased women's responsibilities and workload, for example in the Kenyan highlands [26] or in Oaxaca, Mexico [27]. In some cases, male migrants' strong ties with their mountain homes ensure a steady flow of remittances, empowering the women

at home and increasing their livelihood assets, for example in Nepal [28] and in some parts of the Karakoram in Pakistan [29]. In other parts of the Karakoram, a study found no significant effects of male outmigration on women's decision-making power, and concluded that gender roles were likely to be transformed only in the next generation, as a result of girls' increased access to education [25].



Growing integration in the cash economy

Improved accessibility by road or air opens up new on- and off-farm income opportunities for women, but it may also increase their deprivation and discrimination. Depending on the geographic situation and their skills, women may opt for tourism, for example working as guides or selling handicrafts. Some establish small businesses along roads. Off-farm work is not always a matter of choice, though: In Mongolia, very poor women do unhealthy and exhausting work in artisanal and small-scale mining because they have no other option [30]. In the agricultural sector, emerging markets for high-value niche products such as fair trade and organic highland coffee or ancient crops like amaranth and quinoa enable mountain women to participate in the cash economy and benefit from it. Besides premium and niche products, standard market commodities like vegetables and flowers are increasingly being produced in mountain regions as well, for example in Africa, offering women opportunities for salaried work [31]. However, high price volatility, negative environmental impacts of agricultural intensification, trade agreements that disadvantage poor mountain people, as well as competition with production for food security can jeopardize positive outcomes [32].

Overall, participation in the cash economy does not automatically translate into greater economic security and decision-making power over household income and other assets for women. Mountain women's livelihoods and

It takes more than one hand to plough this field in Shebek, Eritrea. (Photo by Paul Roden, CDE)



Poor women in Nepal collect rhododendron flowers, a non-timber forest product, which they process into juice and sell to earn a little cash. (Photo by Sibonghile Pradhan, DFID)

BOX 2 Climate change and invasive species

Rising temperatures and increasingly unstable rainfall patterns are changing vegetation characteristics. In the Sankhuwasabha district, Nepal, women farmers indicated that the regeneration of forest and undergrowth is decreasing because climate change is accelerating the spread of the white-flowered *banmara*. This variety of the invasive *Chromolaena odorata* is neither edible nor good for making organic pesticides. Its spread has reduced the yields of timber, fodder, wild fruits, seeds and other important non-timber forest products. The decline in mosses, lichens, broom grass, asparagus and several medicinal plants has reduced opportunities for poor women and other marginalized people to earn a little extra income.

Source: [20]

well-being will only improve if they succeed in renegotiating their rights and tasks within their families and with their husbands [7, 27]. In Bhutan, women's rate of participation in the labour force increased to 41 percent in 2012 [33], but they earned 25 percent less than men [34]. Recent analyses in Rwanda and elsewhere point in the same direction [35, 36]. Cash crop production seems to increase the segmentation of local populations, even if it occurs within fair trade initiatives [37, 38]. This underlines the need to consider women's gains and risks from an intersectional perspective, viewing them not only as women, but also as members of social classes, castes, ethnic groups and generations.

Climate and environmental change

Mountain regions are highly sensitive to climate change. Its impacts put many mountain ecosystem goods and services at risk. Natural hazards, such as storms, landslides, avalanches or droughts, may become more frequent [39]. Vegetation patterns may change, pasture quality may decrease, and soil fertility may decline due to increased soil erosion. Combined with environmental degradation and biodiversity loss, climate change creates new uncertainties for mountain communities and thus reduces their resilience (Box 2). Mountain women are particularly affected because they often have limited access not only to natural and financial resources but also to climate change information. As their traditional knowledge gradually loses relevance, their vulnerabilities therefore tend to increase [13].

The way forward

With SDG 5, to achieve gender equality, and the SDG targets of conserving mountain ecosystems and using them sustainably (targets 6.6, 15.1 and 15.4), the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development has set crucial objectives. Progress towards them will improve the situation of women living in mountains. The Agenda provides little guidance, however, as to *how* its goals and targets might be achieved. Experience shows that the situation of mountain women remains critical, despite progress over the last two decades in mainstreaming gender

across policies and strategies. This calls for more fundamental change. Approaches must not only address the symptoms of inequality, but also help communities and development practitioners to understand and address underlying gender norms that perpetuate unequal relations between women and men. Understanding and disentangling complex power relations and their dynamics in times of rapid change is a prerequisite to transforming them in a way that ensures more equal and inclusive development.

This section presents a selection of approaches that have proved effective or appear promising for transforming women's situation and increasing gender equality. The approaches are discussed with a focus on mountain-specific challenges.

Recognizing mountain women's diversity

Development interventions can only succeed if they acknowledge the diversity of their target groups. In order for development projects and programmes in mountain regions to take adequate account of gender diversity, they must appreciate the multifaceted circumstances of individual women and create an environment that enables everyone – including very poor and marginalized women and girls – to become their own agent of change. The *Resource Package on Gender Mainstreaming in EU Development Cooperation*, an online resource base created to support the EU's Gender Action Plan II (2016–2020), provides good guidance in this field. It encompasses a broad range of strategies and tools that support contextualized development approaches, including a section on gender analysis as a tool to refine generalizations, such as “the poor” or “farmers”. FAO's well-known Socio-Economic and Gender Analysis (SEAGA) is another useful approach for examining and understanding the social and economic capabilities of individuals in their specific social environment [40, 41].

Engaging mountain communities for gender equality

When it comes to building awareness and creating a broad commitment in mountain communities towards change in gender relations, the Gender Action Learning System (GALS) is a

promising tool. This innovative methodology for community-led empowerment is designed for integration in rural development programmes and builds on the principles of inclusion, respect and equity. It consists of learning mechanisms and structures for ongoing action learning in communities. A review of a pilot project in the context of highland coffee production in Uganda found conclusive evidence of a shift in cultural norms, with a profound positive impact on gender equality [42, 43].

Addressing women's workload

Renegotiating women's workload and the gendered division of labour is crucial not only for improving women's well-being but also for enabling them to actively participate in decision-making and give them better leadership opportunities. A conceptual framework of UNDP addresses domestic workloads along three interconnected dimensions: recognition, reduction and redistribution of unpaid work. Improved technologies such as efficient stoves, better transportation systems and multifunctional engines for water pumping, milling and dehusking can help to reduce workloads – but only if the other two dimensions are considered [44]. Importantly, change can only be achieved if men – fathers, brothers and sons – are offered space to renegotiate the gains and loss of privilege they may fear or face as a result of women's empowerment. MenEngage Alliance is one of the non-governmental organizations that seek to provide a collective voice on the need to engage men and boys in gender equality [45].

Improving mountain women's access to resources

Ensuring mountain women's rights and access to land and other productive resources requires overarching measures at all levels of governance. UN Women and the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights provide guidance for law- and policymakers, as well as civil society organizations and other stakeholders, to support the adoption and effective implementation of laws, policies and programmes that can trigger gender equality. Issues covered range from international and regional legal and policy frameworks to good practices in dealing with problems of marital status and family relations in the context of land titling and tenure rights. Often, change processes require delicate navigation between customary rights and modern legislation. Major improvements in women's legal status, particularly with respect to family laws, have been achieved in Latin America, where most countries have repealed laws identifying the husband as the household head. This has enabled women to administer family property [16].

Ensuring equitable budgets

Gender-responsive budgeting has become a widely acknowledged tool for achieving gender

equality. It consists of a gender-based assessment of public budgets at the local, regional and national levels, with the aim of creating budgets that reflect the development interests and needs of women and men equally. The assessment helps to identify gender inequalities – for example in capacity development or in access to markets and resources – so that they can be explicitly addressed. The Austrian Development Cooperation has compiled a useful gender-responsive budgeting checklist [46].



Monitoring performances

Sex-disaggregated data and information about women's and men's needs and situations are a prerequisite for gender-sensitive policymaking and project planning, implementation and outcome monitoring [7]. A manual of FAO's SEAGA initiative provides guidance on collecting sex-disaggregated data for statistics. It further addresses issues such as adequate gender perception, prevalent gender stereotypes and biases, underutilization of existing data and lack of communication between producers and users of data [47]. However, while more adequate and detailed data are fundamentally important, they alone cannot ensure transformation towards gender equality. Effective and substantial progress on gender equality must always involve critical reflection on common theories of change, impact assessment and aid effectiveness.

History has shown that social justice achievements are never entirely secured. They must be defended, again and again. With the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the UN member states have renewed their commitment to achieve gender equality in all development sectors and to conserve mountain ecosystems. Both undertakings are among the key components of a transformation towards gender justice and increased well-being for women in mountains.

A coffee factory in the highlands of Laos offers young women an opportunity to earn their own money. (Photo by Sabin Bieri, CDE)

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Note: URLs were last checked on 20 March 2017.

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Cover photo: Women and men are raising their hands to vote at a village assembly in a Bolivian mountain community. (CDE photo collection)

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