

The Role of Women in the Andean Mountain Ecosystem

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Farm in Argentina. Photo: Augustino Barros

Despite the efforts of the United Nations to draw attention to governments on issues of the mountains, they have not considered priorities like the risks brought by extreme cold weather, snow, wind, altitude, ice and other adverse factors causing suffering to mountain people.

In this era of globalisation, women have a higher position in their personal and professional roles and in some areas, are equal in those functions that were previously regarded as male preserves. However women in the mountains are often marginalised and vulnerable. In these societies, women are taking on roles more challenging compared to men, fulfilling roles in and outside the house, often working over 14 hours per day. Up at 5 o'clock in the morning, going on foot or on horseback, often accompanied by a mule load, they are traveling long distances to the nearest town to seek basic necessities. Meat and vegetables are produced in the home, although the meat they eat is usually mutton or llama meat, as breeding cattle is not possible given the weather conditions. When it comes to cooking, wood is used from the area and there is an absence of water, electricity and gas.

People use river water, both for cooking food and washing, which is heated in winter in the kitchen. Clothes do not vary much for the people of the interior, but the quilts of the cold *guarecen* area are woven on a loom and the wool of sheep and llamas make thick cloth for the raw winter days.

The children attend schools and remain there during the week, returning to their homes on Saturday. Teaching occurs in summer due to the extreme temperatures that do not permit attendance during the colder months.

In addition to the workload and responsibilities of women, they remain victims of violence and abuse on an ongoing basis by men who have rarely married his partner. Alcoholism is usually responsible in these situations. This maybe highlights the strength of women to continue, in spite of this, and pursue their own lives and that of their household. In the north of Argentine,

such as in Maryland, we have seen many cases of battered women and girls raped by their own parents, but none of these violations were reported, either out of fear, shame or custom.

The population of these areas clearly suffer from the lack of variety in food which prevents them from developing an optimal physical condition. They do not reach the height and weight inherent in the people of the city. It is very common that women have children at a very early age, with rarely any birth control being used, which means a malnourished mother is giving birth to a child under the same poor conditions they were brought up in.

Insecurity and lack of support is a constant problem. Hospitals are only to be found in nearby towns. Often health centres for primary health care (CAPS) are only served by nursing students and trainees, with a doctor attending on a rotating basis and only found rare occasions. If there is an emergency, there are virtually no ambulances or emergency services. In more serious cases, death is likely as in remote areas and with no way to communicate for assistance - which can be done only by helicopter – by which time it is too late.

Under these conditions it is very difficult to enable women to take other responsibilities given the environment and their poor education which ends at a primary school in the best of cases. Their future is limited to take care of household chores or migrate to the cities in search of work, which is generally limited to being employed as a domestic, living in the suburbs and inevitably surrounded by drugs and violence.

Our proposal

We believe priority should be given to education in providing greater strategic value. It could extend life expectancy and the socio-economic development of women who, because of their biological make-up and mental qualities, are educators, good administrators and protectors of the family unit. Education can change the way of life for them and their family.

For this, it is imperative that the state, through its agencies and accompanied by civil society and through NGOs, builds a structure of sustainable development for the region. We must end the hand-outs and instead provide the essential skills and abilities, strong enough to carry out what is needed to satisfy basic needs of food, health and education. This can then help bring dignity to the lives of these women and the mountain population in general.

There are crops such as *quinoa* and *amaranth* known as *kiwicha*, that could be grown and although not produced in these areas, given their geographical and climatic requirements could be, but are not due to ignorance,. The *quinoa* (*Chenopodium quinoa*) and *kiwicha* or *amaranth* (*Amaranthus caudatus*) are Andean grains that contain proteins characterised by high biological value (essential amino acids) and nutritional value, which have their roots in America. The rescue of these crops for Andean people has a very strong symbolic value from a cultural point of view as well as being of great nutritional value. An important point here is that 80 percent of those concerned and who are innovators with this crop are women. Only with training, incentives, awareness and the support of the state, can women succeed in regaining ownership of these developments.

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Quinoa . Photo: Wikimedia Commons



Amaranth or *kiwicha* Photo: Wikimedia Commons