

## Women of the Mountains Nepalese Experience

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**Mountains are feminine:** Nature by itself is feminine concept. Nepali word for earth is Prithvi, who is feminine divinity in Hindu scripture and Sanskrit literature. Mt. Everest, the highest mountain in the world, is also known as Chomolongma, which means the “mother goddess of the earth”. Several mountains in the Nepal Himalayas have feminine names. Annapurna mountain range is named after the Buddhist goddess of bounty and harvest. Mt. Gaurishankar is known after goddess Parvati and her consort Lord Shiva. There are other feminine names of mountains such as Pathivara, Manaslu, Himalchuli, etc.



Mt. Everest (8,848m), the world's highest mountain

**Women face hardships in mountains:** Ms. Pasang Lhamu Sherpa, the first Nepalese woman who successfully climbed the Mt. Everest, the world's highest mountain located in Nepal. She created the mountaineering history on April 22, 1993, though she died on return after the successful climb. Her mountaineering feat shows that Nepalese women are determined and resolute character, committed to a dream, and desire to succeed. Hers is a

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story of courage perseverance, and desire to achieve, despite the hardships and challenges posed by nature.



Ms. Pasang Lhamu Sherpa, first Nepalese woman to climb the Mt. Everest

Nepal's Mountain women do that just about every day, but are unsung, despite the hardship they face and the challenges they confront. The Himalayas sustain life, but pose hardships and challenges. Mountains in Nepal are young and fragile. Women in Nepal have to negotiate the hardships imposed by the mountains, compounded by their poverty and the burden of raising their families. Women have to fetch fodder and water, move up and down the hills carrying backloads of things to do day daily chores, and toil in the fields. They travel to distances to find markets.



Mountain women fetch water from distance

**Women face paternalistic discrimination:** Women in Nepal were traditionally marginalized and discriminated by the paternalistic framework that had influence in the socio-economic and political discourse. Women faced discrimination, traditional as well as legal, in the political, socioeconomic and cultural arena. They were denied property rights. A considerable number of poor ignorant women from the mountains are still trafficked to brothels outside Nepal and are subject to various sexual exploitations. Women in the mountains are often the most marginalized groups of people as they are usually away from power centers and as they mostly reside in rural areas. There are various stories of domestic violence against women.

**Women and Conflict:** Mountain women in Nepal are asserting themselves, in the political social and economic discourse. It was this assertion that brought a large number of women to join the Maoist Movement in the 12-year “people’s war” as guerillas. There was presence a large number, up to 40%, of women in the Maoist guerillas. Women were in the frontline of the conflict. Women and children were among those who had to bear the burnt of the conflict most. Many lost their lives in the conflict. Many faced human rights violations. Many others have been displaced.



Mountain women were in the frontline of the Nepalese conflict

**Women in New Political Discourse:** Women in Nepal are seeking larger role in the political discourse. Women protestors were active during the April 2006 Democracy Movement. Women took to the streets and defied

curfew during democracy movement. Since then, the state has committed positive or affirmative action in favour women, including through a higher representation in the political process, in bureaucracy and in decision-making levels.

Now women are part of an active peace process. The Communist Party of Nepal (CPN)-Maoist, which led the “people’s war” has now officially entered an interim parliament, including a third of their women members. The historic peace agreement of November 21 has ended the conflict. Nepal is striving to a restructured state, that is socially inclusive and democratically liberal and accommodation to all including women.

Things have started to change. There is a movement of sorts for repealing discriminatory legislation. New legislation on equal citizenship and property rights has addressed some of these discriminatory provisions that existed in the Nepalese laws. There are increasing opportunities for women after restoration of peace and democracy in the country.



Women are active in conservation

**Conventional Wisdom:** Women conserve nature. There are various success stories involving the mountain women in Nepal. Mother’s Groups are emerging as powerful institutions that make changes in the environment they live in. There is a considerable conventional wisdom of the mountain women in protection of environment, in harvesting food, in finding medicinal values of plants, herbs and animal products. Their role in education, entrepreneurship, and small business is noteworthy. Women are also successful in micro-credit. Women in Nepal often produce innovative solutions to the problems of severe physical and environmental conditions in the mountains they live in. They use their conventional wisdom in health related issues and have been successfully transcending the knowledge

through oral traditions. Women in the mountains do their best despite the poor access to health services, education, water, markets and other physical amenities.

Women's groups are also playing important roles in mountain tourism. Women are playing important role in participatory community development, including in the community forestry, which has been replicated elsewhere as a good model. Women are increasingly active in environment conservation. Women in mountains are committed to preserve their mountain environment and culture. Sustaining mountain environment is a big challenge. Women must be involved in decision-making and sharing the fruits of sustainable mountain development. It is not impossible to do miracles in mountains, if we encourage the talents, wisdom and participation of women in deciding their fate. We must also increase their access to resources and economic activities. They must be empowered. Gender mainstreaming of mountain woman is a must for the sustainable development of the mountains.

**Global Platforms:** At the UN, the issue of sustainable development of the mountains is in the agenda since it was incorporated in the Agenda 21 of the Rio Earth Summit. The Rio Declaration of 14 June 1992 acknowledged that women have a vital role in environmental management and development and that their full participation was essential to achieve sustainable. It also accepted that indigenous people and their communities have a vital role in environmental management and development because of their knowledge and traditional practices. This applied to mountain women.

The Plan of Implementation of the World Summit on Sustainable Development has overall policy framework for sustainable development of mountain region. It has been widely acknowledged that development of mountains is necessary for eradication of poverty, sustenance of environment and promotion of biodiversity and for increasing potentials of tourism.

The UN Commission on Sustainable development recognizes the central role of women in the sustainable use and management of resources and the importance of their needs to be addressed.

The Bishkek Mountain Platform 2002 provides for good basis for cooperation in sustainable mountain development. It also acknowledges that mountain people, particularly disadvantaged groups such as women and children, suffer more than others from the unequal distribution of assets and from conflicts.

Thimphu declaration of the mountain women conference, adopted on October 4, 2002, acknowledges that without women, it is impossible to achieve sustainable development in mountain. It further stresses that is impossible for mountain women to nurture their families, sustain livelihoods, carry out business activities, contribute to the well-being of their communities, and protect their environment in absence of peace, an safe environment, and food security. It has very well articulated the voice and concerns of mountain women and their perspective on peace, natural resource use, and sustainable mountain development. Furthermore, it called for effective policies, networks, partnerships and alliances at the local, national, regional and international levels for reduction of mountain women's economic, social and political marginalization. This agenda needs to be further strengthened and pursued for better implementation at all levels.

Mountains today face severe problems of natural degradation, soil erosion, deforestation, negative consequences of agriculture, tourism etc, which have negative consequences for betterment of lives of the people in the mountains, including women. These negative consequences cannot be solved without active involvement of women, who are the custodians of their environment. There is a greater need of increasing involvement of women, civil society, and all stake holders for sustainable mountain development. The multi-stakeholder approach to sustainable mountain development should be further strengthened.

There is need for more institutional and financial support policy and action on gender equality and mainstreaming and for promoting a rights-based approach to development to empower mountain women. Mountain women should be given the equitable representation in all decision-making bodies and processes including in the process that affects their communities, cultures and environments in the mountains.

Women of the mountains are custodians of conventional wisdom, conventional knowledge transcended from the words of mouth, which needs to be encouraged and preserved. Education of women farmers is crucially important to increase their role in the sustainable development of the mountain ecosystems.

Women need improved access to the resources in mountain regions, a fact recognized in the UN GA resolution 60/198 on sustainable mountain development.

Women in the mountains are also mostly women of the indigenous communities, women with least participation in the decision making processes, and least access to the resources of their region. They need to be empowered.

There is a special need to address the situation of women affected by the conflict in the mountains. Nepalese experience reinforces this notion.

We need to strengthen regional cooperation, cooperation between mountain regions of the world, taking into account of the difference in the mountain regions of the world. The mountainous regions of the developed world and lesser developed parts should forge partnerships with some tangible projects that benefit women of the mountains.

“Women of the Mountains” is a commendable process. This needs to be maintained and further institutionalized. Its declarations should be implemented with realistic small steps supported by an action plan.

The concerns and plights of the mountain women should be addressed at all levels, including in any institutional, policy or political discourse that may affect their lives. In this context, the proposed gender architecture of the United Nations should be prepared to address the additional vulnerabilities of the mountain women.

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