**Mountains & women**

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MOUNTAIN development has gained considerable attention globally in the development sphere after the needs of mountain communities were recognised in the Agenda 21, Chapter 13 (`Fragile Mountain Environments`). Mountain communities are in the front line of climate change but due to difficult geographic terrain, remote location, poor inf rastructure and lack of access to markets and information, they face increased hardships and challenges when faced with new vulnerabilities like the Covid-19 pandemic.

Women and mountains: Women and mountains share an intricate relationship that makes their role in sustainable development critical for preserving mountain environments. However the conversation about poverty, inequality and exclusion remains incomplete when people who suffer these afflictions do not have a voice to speak.

Women are the last to benefit from economic boom and the first to suffer from regression.

Despite their contribution mountain women remain a marginalised gender of marginalised mountain areas f acing double marginalisation with high workload responsibility and low decision-making representation.

Women`s triple role: The triple role of production, reproduction and development puts excessive burden on women`s health and physical ability. Lack of access to healthcare and low priority in education and nutrition put women at a disadvantage. As resource managers women work on farms, supportirrigation activities, take care of the livestock and perform all domestic chores but rarely do they own land or make policy decisions that af fect their lives.

Power struggle: The deeply rooted sociocultural practices play a significant role in deepening the gender divide. Patriarchy plays a major role in increasing gender disparity, depriving women of getting equal opportunity from household to social spaces in public discourse.

Migration: One of the major issues facing women in mountain areas is male migration triggered by food security and economic conditions as a result of climate change and disasters. Although trends of outmigration are being researched and analysed, scarce data is available on the impact of migration on the population that remains behind women and children. Feminisation of poverty therefore creates gendered trends of migration.

Disasters: Lessons learnt from natural disasters in mountain areas over the past decade and a half illustrate how psychological vulnerabilities, sociocultural and economic marginalisation and gender stereotypes make all the difference in who gets killed and who survives outlining the main reason why women get disproportionately affectedduring and after disasters. The vulnerabilities of the post-disaster phase can lead to creating `second-generation disasters` for inequity and violence.

Moving beyond the stereotype image of women: Women`s main traditional role is perceived as care provider at home, free labour on the farm, water and wood collection and taking care of livestock. Men`s role is to be the provider and decision-maker who control all income and represent family in public spaces with a voice in community matters. Male outmigration is imposing new roles on women, increasing their responsibilities for which they have no capacity, training or institutional leverage to fulfil this role ef fectively.

Women empowerment: Women`s empowerment is important, both as a human rights objective, and as a means of increasing productivity both at the household and society level. Most definitions of empowerment focus on resources, agency and achievement.

Together agency and resources constitute achievement or `functioning achievement`which is related to universally shared basic functioning, but also refers to individual choices.

There are four important componentsthat together constitute true empowerment.

1. Psychological empowerment: Selfesteem and dignity of women in society affording them confidence to engage in public discourse without fear 2. Social empowerment: The role and status of women in society as equal partners with equal access to opportunities and resources to perform societal functions 3. Political empowerment: The extent to which women are represented at institutional platforms with decision-making powers 4. Economic empowerment: Business opportunities and the ability to control the income generated through such activities With deep investment gaps, and disproportionately impacted by climate change mountain communities face daunting challenges that require a radical shift in gender roles in society. We need to reimagine the role of women, break the stereotype mould and invest in the human capital of women to strengthen community resilience and protect mountain environments.  The writer is chief executive of civil society coalition for climate change.

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