



## Symposium Report

### EMPOWERING WOMEN IN RURAL HIMALAYAN COMMUNITIES

NORLHA | 14 APRIL 2016

#### Introduction

The focus of Norlha's symposium on women's empowerment in rural Himalayan communities came about as a result of the 2014 symposium (on Agricultural communities of the Himalayas), which highlighted the importance of gender as a cross cutting issue and the subsequent importance of female empowerment and gender equality. In response to this, in Lausanne Norlha convened a wide range of development and academic partners as well as government representatives to share their experience, lessons learnt and to help develop recommendations on the topic.

This is a particularly pertinent topic within development given the increasing recognition of the need to promote female empowerment as a way to effectively address poverty.

Organizations represented at symposium included University of Zurich, Center for Development and Environment (CDE – Univ. of Bern), International Institute for Management Development (IMD), the Bhutanese embassy, the Nepalese embassy, Terre des hommes, Helvetas, Norlha, AIWC, and the Non-Resident Nepali Association. Representatives of many other organisations attended in a personal capacity.

The success of the symposium in addressing some of the many opportunities and challenges which face women in the Himalayas was largely due to the quality of the inputs provided by the academic experts and development professionals.

#### Executive summary

The **objectives** of the symposium were to provide the opportunity for practitioners and all interested parties to exchange best practices and search for new and promising solutions and approaches on the concrete issues faced by the women in the Himalayas; to explore new opportunities for joint international community initiatives; to advance the knowledge base on the topic; and finally to strengthen awareness<sup>1</sup> amongst NGOs, the general public, governments and all stakeholders of the importance of women's empowerment and gender equality within the context of the rural Himalayan region.

1 Encouraging them to **place women at the heart of their development activities**, and to commit more attention and resources to women & development projects.

Overall, the symposium showed how crucial the role of women is, as actors of rural development as well as highlighting their situation of vulnerability, and the increased pressure put upon them as a result of migration, adding to their already heavy workload.

The negative impact of migration practices, as well as the huge workload of women were the most pressing issues discussed and the need for action to address this. To this end recommendations were made relating to tested solutions as well as lessons learnt and further improvement.

Various participants called for an increased role of NGOs in building awareness on the risks and opportunities of migration, and on building the capacities of women in general; and the need for a more in depth analysis of the intersectionality of women groups within different situations of poverty and vulnerability contexts.

These **recommendations** made by the experts and panellists call for a more nuanced and research based analysis of the feminization of poverty; in actions to make migration safer for migrants from Himalayan communities; and extended initiatives in awareness raising and capacity building of remote communities, as well as field NGOs staff and other actors.

As a **key** outcome, these **recommendations** call for continued research with closer synergies and new partnerships to better integrate women into existing research and practices, recognizing the crucial importance of a gendered analysis and focus on women for efficient, sustainable development initiatives.

The symposium also heard of a new initiative launched by Norlha, 'Women in the Himalayas' that seeks to serve the above purposes, in partnership with all interested development actors. Drawing on Norlha's experience, this initiative will provide a learning, training, knowledge-sharing resource. Its unique feature is to combine field experience (lessons learnt, best practices) from ongoing projects, with research analysis, which in turn feeds back into the field practice (project design and implementation), thus developing the capacity of projects to better address the needs of women.

In partnership with other actors, the Women in the Himalayas initiative will focus on:

- The **promotion** of women empowerment in the Himalayas,
- **Applied learning, research and analysis** (i.e. of direct application of lessons learnt to field projects targeting women) informing future practice through applied learning,
- Knowledge **dissemination and promotion of best practice** (to other NGOs and international organisations working on this) and
- **Capacity building** and **Gender mainstreaming**.

A concept note of this initiative was briefly presented; capacity building activities have been launched in the field and further actions will be designed, in line with the recommendations of the symposiums.

## Symposium Statement: A call for commitment to increasing development activities for and through women in the Himalayas

Based on today's discussion around the importance of strengthening activities, initiatives, resources on this crucial topic of women's empowerment, and based on the recommendations made by experts and participating organisations, the symposium concluded that further research is needed, and Norlha urged participants to recommit efforts to address this within the context of rural communities which are largely overlooked at present.

It is now widely accepted that targeting women, as the 'pillars of the community' is the most effective way to translate aid into sustainable development.

Norlha will draw on its current experience to provide a learning, training, knowledge-sharing resource – the **Women in the Himalayas<sup>2</sup> initiative**, which will act as a resource to national and international NGOs, governments and international organisations working in this field and promote best practice and capacity building. It will focus on the promotion of women's empowerment in the Himalayas, through applied research, analysis and the dissemination of findings, (i.e. of direct application of lessons learnt to field projects targeting women), as well as to work on capacity building and gender mainstreaming.

Organisations interested in the topic and in placing women at the heart of their development efforts are invited to participate in a simple follow-up exchange, based on the recommendations coming out of today's exchanges, in terms of required action identified today as priorities, on initiatives and commitments in a joint and committed effort to **empowering women, and to improving the lives of people in the Himalayas**.

## Key outcomes, findings and recommendations from the panels and working groups

### Topic 1: Role and place of women in rural economy

Women are the backbone of the rural economy in the Himalayas yet they represent a disproportionate percentage of the poor. The high number of men leaving rural Nepal for urban areas and foreign countries such as India, the Gulf countries or Malaysia, is exacerbating the "feminization" of the agriculture. Despite women's high contribution to the agricultural economy, they often have no formal entitlement of land, and very limited access to economic resources (credits, markets), technologies, health services and education (42% illiterate). All these are factors that increase the socio-economic vulnerabilities of women and girls in rural areas; therefore empowering them calls for a comprehensive and transversal approach.

The lower status of women in the Himalayas is also strongly linked to a lack of access to education for girls. Education is key when it comes to the empowerment of women and to overcoming gender inequalities. However, education and empowerment of women won't be successful without an active involvement of men at all stages of their implementation.

Norlha projects address several of the above-mentioned issues. They focus on drudgery reduction, allowing women to have time for other productive and skill development activities, building women's capacities and self-confidence so they can become active members of their communities as well as on raising awareness on gender equality by involving men and fostering dialogue in the community.

2 The Concept Note of the Women in the Himalayas initiative is [available here](#).

Two other very prominent issues facing women were mentioned, namely *chaupadi*<sup>3</sup> and child marriage: *Chaupadi* is still widely practiced in Nepal. NGOs have to pay specific attention to these issues in their projects, e.g. further involving with community volunteers in the village, who are key to raising awareness around these practices.

Regarding child marriage, many girls drop out of schools and suffer from long-lasting physical and mental health consequences due to this practice. Recommended action could entail facilitating economic alternatives to early marriage, sensitization around reproductive health and women's rights, etc.

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Exchanges also mentioned that NGOs interventions on women's rights must be based on a sound comprehension of gender equality: gender mainstreaming at all levels of an organization should be actively pursued.

## **Topic 2: Impact and consequences of out-migration & financial instruments**

Migration has become an important livelihood strategy for many Nepalese people, with mixed results both to those migrating and those left behind. It was agreed that despite the risks it poses to individuals involved, migration cannot be stopped, and the only possibility for development actors is to be part of a positive change that tries to ensure the positive outcomes and effects of migration for all those involved.

The demand of migrant workers (mainly in Gulf States and Malaysia) is huge. Although men constitute the majority of migrants, increasingly women also decide to leave Nepal in search of a better life.

However, migration is risky and unsafe endeavour. Abuse and exploitation by recruitment agencies, middlemen or employers in the country of destination are common.

In case of male out-migration, the women left behind often have to deal with increased workloads, have difficulties to take proper care of the land and lack the skills and information to use or save remittances. Between 25 to 30% of Nepal's GDP is from overseas remittances. Money is often transferred via informal channels and the families depending on this money usually do not receive it regularly.

It was noted that particularly significant within the new patterns of poverty related to migration which are forming is the notion of "semi-peasants". This denotes those that are becoming detached from the land/agriculture due to a decline in knowledge of agricultural techniques, and fall into an increasing wage-dependence. This work can be highly insecure with low efficiency and often does not provide the means for sustainable livelihoods.

3 Social tradition in parts of Nepal for Hindu women which prohibits a woman from participating in normal family activities during menstruation because they are considered impure. Women are kept out of the house and have to live in a cowshed.

For NGOs working on the topic of migration, there could be a role to focus not only on those left behind but also on those leaving. Strategies to work towards safe migration could be developed. NGOs could have a role in facilitating access to good recruitment agencies, skills training and awareness-raising for those who plan to migrate. NGOs could furthermore advocate and support the establishment of safe money transfers and credits.

Regarding the situation of families left behind, NGOs should increase their focus on the patterns of rural economy and the transactions around land and the labour market in the villages, in order to provide more targeted and meaningful support. It was agreed that trainings in financial literacy are key when it comes to the empowerment of women left behind in rural Nepal and it was suggested that existing initiatives should be extended to include financial counselling and saving programmes, as these trainings not only provide women with a new skill but also with greater self-confidence. This is of particular importance for young women and newlyweds who only recently have left their family of origin to move into the house with the family of their husband. This calls for a perspective of gender and generation. It was noted that the changes of land rights also could potentially have important positive implications if applied in practice and NGOs could play a lobbying and capacity building role here. Another meaningful intervention could be the support of the women and men who return to Nepal.

### **Topic 3: Post-earthquake: Women at the heart of sustainable reconstruction**

In the post-earthquake context in Nepal, women are a particularly vulnerable population because of their traditional role within the community, and also because of their specific needs in terms of health and security. Therefore, the emergency aid after the earthquake has aimed to address women's problems right after the disaster, as well as in the recovery phase. The issue of health (dangerous delivery, hygiene, food security, etc.) but also of security (risks of sexual assault) have been tackled by Norlha and other organizations. It was noted that implementers must be aware of the gender perspective of disasters (impact, needs, role, benefits).

The recovery programmes have aimed to include women in the reconstruction process to ensure a "build back better" process. "Building back better" can take multiple forms: ensuring house/land title and land ownership for women; building toilet facilities to facilitate girls' access to school and reduce risk of sexual harassment; reduce drudgery and improve health e.g. by building stoves; ensuring livelihoods for women and their participation in the community. Reconstruction programmes must also be sustainable and use the local knowledge, especially in reconstruction techniques, which may in turn also prove a viable income generating activity for women.

In terms of disaster reduction, it is agreed that work with VDCs is needed to obtain segregated data about vulnerable people but also to assess the specific vulnerabilities of women in order to fully involve them in disaster preparedness plan. As a consequence, disaster can also act as an opportunity to empower women. Most recommendations also insisted on the need to create women's groups during the implementations of projects in order to target their specific needs and to receive information about the aid provided to ensure fair access and distribution.

#### **Topic 4: Agricultural practices of women**

Initially, speakers highlighted that the topic of agriculture and women in Nepal should be investigated with a stronger socio-economic lens and within a greater analysis of the overall context of agriculture and agricultural transition processes in the country.

Agriculture is certainly tough work both for women and men; the tasks can get dangerous and the workload very heavy. Nowadays, due to various factors we are observing an increase in the “feminization of agriculture”, which, does not necessarily lead either to women’s empowerment directly nor to improved agriculture. For instance, this phenomenon combined with male out-migration is causing an alarming problem of food insecurity. Even so, this new role for women has indeed urged them to look for solutions and to organize in groups in order to face common challenges together. For example, agricultural communities are open to new ways of farming (i.e. crops, methods) and it is frequently observed that elder generations tend to wait until others have tested these solutions before adopting them for good. Lastly, access to resources remains gender-biased with prevailing male ownership and decision-making dominating agricultural practices.

However the changing position of women in agriculture provides opportunities for their empowerment with clear advantages for the sector and represents a crucial issue for the development community to address. It was noted that efforts towards empowerment should be made simultaneously with investment in agriculture, otherwise women will leave farming for other income-generating opportunities. Additionally, new elements after the 2015 earthquake need to be considered in this process where applicable. In light of the above, Norlha and other organizations need to adjust the strategy for development in Nepal to answer the needs of women and communities most effectively.

#### **Wrap-up and concluding exchange**

The issues of migration as a development strategy was discussed, as it raises some issues. Between 25-30% of Nepal GDP depends on remittances. However, since it's not a reliable strategy, this implies a certain fragility for the country. In relation to this a huge concern for safe working conditions was also expressed given that Nepal does not have the power to ensure safe working conditions in host countries.

Reflecting on what development NGOs can do, the recommendations were that increased advocacy around safe conditions remained important as well as raising awareness of the pitfalls of migration to community groups, especially those who may consider leaving (and their relatives) would be a very useful contribution.

Manuela Tortora concluded the first part of the symposium by presenting the outline of the activities of the Women in the Himalayas initiative set up by Norlha; describing the ways in which the learning, training, and knowledge-sharing programme can contribute to the issues raised and discussed during the symposium. The Concept Note of this initiative is [available here](#).

## Evening speakers

The second part of the Symposium was opened by Mr Olivier Français, Conseiller Municipal from the City of Lausanne and Conseiller aux Etats (Federal Parliament). Then H.E. the ambassador of Nepal Mr Deepak Dhital presented the progress made in women's rights in Nepal, in the context of the recently promulgated constitution, and the election of a female President in Nepal. He also noted the remaining room for progress in the actual implementation of these rights and the enduring challenges facing women in Nepal.

Dr Tejhari Ghimire, Norlha's Head of Regional Office in Nepal, made a lively presentation on the NGO's response after the earthquakes in support of impacted communities, drawing attention to the particular situation of women in Nepal.

Finally, Ms Mira Rai, a young Nepalese trail runner, briefly presented her story which heralds from her childhood in a remote rural village of Nepal up to being an internationally recognized athlete, and her current position as an inspirational role model for younger generations of women in the Himalayas. After a substantive exchange between the above panellists, a film about Mira was shown ([trailer available here](#)).

## Follow-up and reference documents

NB: Additional, updated references and follow-up information will be available here: <http://norlha.org/en/symposium-norlha-empowering-women-rural-himalayan-communities/>

### WOMEN & MIGRATIONS

- **Policy brief on safer migration:** National Centre of Competence in Research (NCCR): <http://www.north-south.unibe.ch/content.php/page/id/327>, e.g. the issue on *Protecting Nepalese women migrant workers*
- **The middle space of migration:** A case study on brokerage and recruitment agencies in Nepal; Alice Kern, Ulrike Müller-Böker, <http://www.bioone.org/doi/pdf/10.1659/mrd.0934>
- **Labour Migration for Employment:** *A Status Report for Nepal: 2013/2014*, Government of Nepal, Ministry of Labour and Employment, Department of Foreign Employment
- On the relationship between **climate change, migration, vulnerability and gender:** Sugden, F, Maskey, N, Clement, F, Ramesh, V, Philip, A, & Rai, A. 2014. Agrarian stress and climate change in the Eastern Gangetic plains: Gendered vulnerability in a stratified social formation. *Global Environmental Change*. 29. 258-269

### WOMEN'S WORKLOAD REDUCTION

- **Women: Walking and Waiting for Water – The Time Value of Public Water Supply** ([http://www2.vwl.wiso.uni-goettingen.de/courant-papers/CRC-PEG\\_DP\\_134.pdf](http://www2.vwl.wiso.uni-goettingen.de/courant-papers/CRC-PEG_DP_134.pdf)); Elena Gross, Isabel Günther, Youdi Schipper, 2013 – ETH, Zurich
- **FAO, Running out of time: The reduction of women's work burden in agricultural production;** <http://www.fao.org/3/a-i4741e.pdf>; This publication collects a number of initiatives and studies on the reduction of women's workload. It also contains quite some literature on **failed initiatives** – mostly due to a lack of solid context analysis, see for example p. 25.

- **Women: Walking and Waiting for Water – The Time Value of Public Water Supply**; Elena Gross, University of Göttingen & Isabel Günther, ETH Zürich; [http://www.econstor.eu/bitstream/10419/90533/1/CRC-PEG\\_DP\\_134.pdf](http://www.econstor.eu/bitstream/10419/90533/1/CRC-PEG_DP_134.pdf)
- Regarding women’s workload there is also a methodological problem: solid techniques to register time use are elaborate and thus costly. UNRISD has published quite a bit on this, namely Valeria Esquivel.

## FEMINISATION OF POVERTY

- The ‘Feminisation of Poverty’ and the ‘Feminisation’ of Anti-Poverty Programmes: Room for Revision? Journal of Human Development Vol. 7, No. 2, July 2006
- The ‘Feminization of Poverty’: A Reflection 20 Years After Beijing, UNRISD, March 2015 ([http://www.unrisd.org/UNRISD/website/newsview.nsf/\(httpNews\)/8A36603F76FE20EFC1257DF80055522C?OpenDocument](http://www.unrisd.org/UNRISD/website/newsview.nsf/(httpNews)/8A36603F76FE20EFC1257DF80055522C?OpenDocument))
- Bieri Sabin, 2014. New ruralities – old gender dynamics? A reflection on high-value crop agriculture in the light of the feminization debates. In: Geographica Helvetica 69, 2014. 281-290. (<http://boris.unibe.ch/63738/1/gh-69-281-2014.pdf>)
- Tamang, S., Paudel, K.P. and Shrestha, K. K. 2014, Agricultural (in) justices: Feminization of Agriculture Works and its Impact on Food Security in Nepal, Journal of Forest and Livelihood, vol.12, no.1.

## FEMINISATION OF AGRICULTURE

- **FAO, Integration of Gender in Agriculture: An Analysis of Situation:** [ftp://ftp.fao.org/TC/CPF/Country%20NMTPF/Nepal/thematic%20studies/Gender%20Final%20Report%20\\_TC\\_.pdf](ftp://ftp.fao.org/TC/CPF/Country%20NMTPF/Nepal/thematic%20studies/Gender%20Final%20Report%20_TC_.pdf)
- Gartaula N. H., Niehoh A. and Visser, L. 2010, Feminization of Agriculture as an Effect of Male Out-migration: Unexpected Outcomes from Jhapa District, Eastern Nepal in The International Journal of Interdisciplinary Social Sciences, vol.5, no.2 [http://www.neys-vanhoogstraten.nl/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/2010\\_-Gartaula-et-al.\\_-Feminisation-of-agriculture.pdf](http://www.neys-vanhoogstraten.nl/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/2010_-Gartaula-et-al._-Feminisation-of-agriculture.pdf)

## MIGRATION AND PRECARIETY

- The **notion of “semi-peasants”** by Adhikari and Hopley 2013 on the significance of migration for Nepal’s development
- Davis on the **notion of “semi-peasants”** (2006)
- The Precariat – The New Dangerous Class by G. Standing (2011) on the definition of **precarity** (to qualify the shift from vulnerability to precarity in terms of becoming detached from the land/agriculture and increasing wage-dependence).

## INTERSECTIONALITY

An important subject, especially in countries like Nepal where social hierarchies are dominant: one of the founding articles of the concept is McCall, Leslie 2005: The Complexity of Intersectionality. In: Signs, 30(3), S. 1771-1800.

## Speakers, panellists and facilitators

Panel 1: Role and place of women in rural economy

- Prof. Jean-Pierre Lehmann – IMD
- Ms. Danica Hanz – Norlha

Panel 2: Impact and consequences of out-migration & use of remittances: lessons learned and findings

- Dr. Sabin Bieri - University of Bern – CDE
- Prof. Ulrike Elisabeth Müller-Böker – University of Zurich

Panel 3: Post-earthquake: Women at the heart of sustainable reconstruction: lessons learned and findings

- Ms. Nathalie Praz – Terre des hommes
- Dr. Joep Slaats – Norlha

Panel 4: Agricultural practices of Women

- Dr. Sarah Byrne – Helvetas
- Dr. Tejhari Ghimire – Norlha

Facilitators and wrap-up panel:

- Edward Girardet – Writer and Editor & Norlha board member
- Dr. Manuela Tortora – Norlha
- Dr. Jyoti Sanghera – OHCHR & Norlha board member
- Dr. Sharon McClenaghan – Norlha

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