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**Abstract**

In this article we examine transnational and international discourses and initiatives focused on and/or carried out by the so-called “mountain women”. Tracking the growing reference to “mountain women”, we analyze the way the construction and the claim of a gendered identity has developed within the general debate about the international recognition of the global importance of mountain environments that emerged about 20 years ago. Drawing on documents, a survey and interviews, our main objective aims at exploring how such a reference could lead to the making of an imagined community of “mountain women” offering opportunities for political action. This article concludes that, though women are identified in international discourses as essential contributors to sustainable mountain development, the social identity “mountain women” has not yet evolved into a collective identity around which political solidarities and strategies coalesce to ultimately ground collective action. Indeed, women’s organizations have other themes on their agendas and are active at other scales apart from the global one. Indeed, few are willing to identify themselves as “mountain women”. For the time being, “mountain women” remain silent partners of the global agenda for sustainable mountain development.

**Keywords:** mountain women, mountains, identity, intersectionality, global, sustainable development

**Introduction**

*“Without women, it is impossible to achieve sustainable development in mountain areas”.*<sup>1</sup>

This statement opens the *Thimphu Declaration*, a document produced after the first global conference devoted to the so-called “mountain women”. Held in 2002 in Bhutan, this major event brought together an amazing 250 participants in all, both women and men, from 35 countries to discuss this overlooked but nevertheless important topic: the connection between women, sustainable development and mountains. *Celebrating Mountain Women*, as the gathering came to be called, was said to be “the first such event that sought to give a platform to the unheard voices of mountain women from around the world, and the first ever international gathering devoted to the issues and concerns of mountain women” (Tshering and Josse 2003,

4). The conference took place in the momentum created by the International Year of Mountains (2002) proclaimed by the United Nations General Assembly. For the first time in 10 years, the international recognition of the global importance of mountain environments (Messerli and Ives 1997; Debarbieux and Price 2008; Rudaz forthcoming) that started at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) held in Rio in 1992 had incorporated some kind of gendered agenda.<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, there has been a growing reference to “mountain women” in the context of the identification of mountains as a global issue and the consequent promotion of a global agenda for sustainable development of mountain areas. In this article, we aim at unraveling the content of this gendered category. Because this reference has been mainly formulated in international discourses promoting sustainable mountain development, we look at the social engineering underlying the making of a social category - i.e. the identification of a group from the point of view of international discourse: “they, mountain women”. Beyond this more descriptive part of the study, our main objective aims at exploring how such a reference could lead to the making of an imagined community of mountain women offering opportunities for political action, or, in Polletta and Jasper's (2001) words, a collective identity: “we, mountain women”. We demonstrate that, while the making of such a gendered category appears to be pertinent for actors with a global perspective on mountains, this identification seems of little relevance for the women in the mountains themselves. We argue that the identification of “mountain women” as a social category by the global mountain agenda is not supported by a collective identity as “mountain women” that would ground collective action. Despite the various attempts reviewed in this article, no collective subject “mountain women” has been successfully established – yet. The very heterogeneous world of “women living in mountains” renders difficult the building of a collective identity as “mountain women” at the global scale. We believe that there is little chance of mobilizing women to participate in a global mountain agenda unless they think of themselves as “mountain women”, consider the global scale relevant and ultimately perceive some benefits in the improvement of their condition through being active at this scale.

In the following section we discuss our subject of inquiry, “mountain women”, by situating it in the debate around the articulation between social and collective identity (Jenkins 2000; Massey 1994; Castells 1996; Snow 2001). After presenting gender research in mountain environments and communities, and after addressing the question of categorizing women, we introduce the distinction between social and collective identities. We then describe our sources of information, which are discourses on and by “mountain women”. Having presented our theoretical and empirical frameworks, we examine the ways “mountain women” have been conceived in the global mountain agenda. We go through the corpus of texts and declarations stating the importance of mountains at the global scale and review the main stages of the integration of “mountain women” in sustainable mountain development discourses. We then look at the way “mountain women” conceive of themselves, of their participation and their

contribution to the global mountain agenda. We scrutinize the discourses produced by “mountain women” advocating their cause and the relationships they establish with this agenda. Major events that bring “mountain women” together from around the world and platforms that aim to amplify the voices of “mountain women” are analyzed. We complement this examination with a survey and interviews. In our conclusion, we synthesize the argument by discussing the interconnection between “women” and “mountains” and the various ways these connections have been conceived.

### **What is a “Mountain Women”?**

A substantial number of studies have been devoted to the study of gender relationships in mountain areas throughout the world. Sketches of mountain communities, such as Viazzo’s (1989) authoritative work on the Alps, when considering the situation of women, stress the gendered division of labor and the role of women in the demographic balance of communities. Other studies have focused more specifically on women in mountain areas. The topics are varied, ranging from women’s experiences during the 2005 Kashmir Earthquake (Parker Hamilton and Halvorson 2007) to women challenging norms of gendered work division by working in Appalachian coal mines (Tallichet 2006). Considerable contemporary attention has been devoted to the role of women in the management of natural resources (Agarwal 1992; Nightingale 2006; Gururani 2002) and in common property regimes (Tinker 1994; Lama and Buchy 2002). Few studies, however, have specifically focused on the general place and role of women in mountain communities from a general perspective, such as Hewitt (1989) has done for settlements in the Karakoram-Himalaya in Northern Pakistan or Crettaz (1989) for two regions of the Alps (Valais, Switzerland and Savoie, France). Despite this diverse research, few studies discuss explicitly the mountain specificities of gender issues (Crettaz 1989). Other scholars have focused on the very specific practice of mountaineering, by examining how women challenge the codes of this highly masculine sport (Ortner 1999; Frohlick 2006). In brief, this great diversity of studies reviewed above is about women in mountain areas. The originality of our article is its focus on the political issues related to the reference to the “mountain women” category. By unraveling the content of this category, we aim to explore how this reference has been used (or not) to build identities supporting transnational political strategies.

Studies focusing on women in mountain areas are mainly local in scope, highlighting the household and community level to seek an understanding of the specificity of women’s roles and conditions. There have been very few attempts to produce broader analyses of “mountain women”. Among these are Byers and Sainju’s (1994) paper linking women and mountain environments, Ives’ (1997) consideration of women in the broader theme of inequality in mountain communities and various publications related to the conference *Celebrating Mountain*

*Women* (Tshering and Thapa 2003; Tshering and Josse 2003; Thapa and Maharjan 2003), including a thematic issue of the journal *Mountain Research and Development* entitled “Women in mountains: gathering momentum” (Anand, Zimmerman and Hurni 2002).

Addressing the conditions of “mountain women” at the global scale raises the question of categorizing the varied experiences of “mountain women” throughout the world. The issue of differences within the “sisterhood” is considered one of the major challenges of the feminist movement (Yuval-Davis 1993; Mohanty 1988). Though convenient for many, it is well-known that the label “women” embodies a great diversity of experiences, needs, concerns and interests. Works devoted to the articulation of gender and environmental issues at the global level have encountered such difficulties (Braidotti *et al.* 1994). In brief, the problem of the heterogeneity of the “sisterhood” is reinforced in the case of a “global sisterhood” (Moghadam 2005). The question of diversity seems especially relevant for women in mountain regions. Indeed, mountain areas display hugely diverse environmental, cultural, social, political and economic settings. They have experienced very different processes of development, even within the same mountain range. This mountain heterogeneity makes it difficult to generalize any statement as equally relevant for all mountain regions (Messerli and Ives 1997; Debarbieux and Gillet 2002) and, even more important here, for the condition of “mountain women” (Anand and Josse 2002, 234). In setting the question “Does the mountain woman exist?”, Susanne Wymann von Dach (2002, 236) stresses that the situations of women “even from one valley to the other vary greatly”.

The questions we raise about the designation “mountain women” have been addressed for other sub-categories of women. Works have underlined the difficulty of referring to broad categories that appear to be very heterogeneous, such as “Third World woman” or “rural woman”. In an influential critique, Mohanty (1988, 61) denounced “the production of the Third World Woman as a singular monolithic subject in some recent (western) feminist texts”. Concerning another category, Sachs (1996, 3) emphasized that “although rural women’s lives differ from these of their urban counterparts, we must not view rural women as homogeneous, as they differ by race, class, ethnicity, and sexuality; in short, there is no universal rural woman”. Such an observation also applies to “mountain women”. Therefore, it is worth looking at the politics behind the making of such a category, a process that highlights certain commonalities among the environments and people subsumed in the category. The great diversity of mountain environments and mountain communities makes an interesting case study for looking at how the categories “women” and “mountains” are combined in international and transnational discourses. The concept of intersectionality, which emerged in feminist studies and challenges the creation of monolithic categories, offers an alternative to examine how the identity of women is combined with other identities (Weldon 2008; Crenshaw 1991; Valentine 2007; Pratt 1999). The concept finds its origins in Black feminism in the United States, which intended to “break the assumed homogeneity” of the woman category (Yuval-Davis 1993) and argued that

the condition of Black women cannot be understood by a simple summing of women's condition and Black people's condition (hooks 1981). Rather than looking at social structures (gender, class, race) as separate, intersectionality looks at their mutual construction. In this article, we analyze the intersectionality "mountain-women" and explore how it can support transnational feminist action.

The social sciences have given us a set of conceptual tools for understanding identity issues in contemporaneous societies. Currently, drawing on the work of social theoreticians (Jenkins 2000; Massey 1994; Castells 1996; Snow 2001), we have become accustomed to clearly differentiating between social identities (built from outside the group according to a comprehensive conception of the society) and collective identities (the common will of people to belong to a group characterized by some features exposed to others), the latter being a growing motive for political action. When questioning the possibility of referring to mountains as an identifier, we have to keep in mind that it can be done for building social identities as well as collective identities, both being more or less motivated by political reasons. Therefore, understanding the reason and the modes of the growing reference to "mountain women" requires being aware of the various meanings of the reference. It might be part of the building of a global social identity – built from outside according to the actor's conception of what a mountain is – or the rescaling of a collective identity – a tool for action at the global scale for the self-designated women. Our article focuses on this articulation between social identity and collective identity. Beyond unraveling the content of the "mountain women" category in international discourses on sustainable mountain development (social identity), our central objective is to explore the possibilities of building an imagined community of "mountain women" around which political solidarities and strategies would arise (collective identity). Even if related one to the other, the connection between social identity and collective identity is not necessarily deterministic. The two can be the expression of different agendas. Moreover, the construction of a social identity "women" does not necessarily lead to benefits for or to empowerment of women. International agendas and transnational political actions focusing on women can bring differentiated benefits – not to say detrimental outcomes in certain cases – to women at national and local levels (Alvarez 2000; Friedman 2010). Indeed international agendas do not always resonate with national and local concerns. Finally, the construction of a gendered identity is not always formulated by women and the further discursive control of its content is not always in women's hands (Grewal 1998).

### **Sources of Information: Listening to Mountain Women's Voices**

As stated in the introduction, our interest in examining the notion of "mountain women" derives from our observation of the growing reference to such a gendered category of actors within the global agenda for sustainable development of mountain areas. Our studies have long focused on

mountains as a geographical category, on mountains as a source of political identities and on the integration of mountain people into mountain policies (Debarbieux and Rudaz 2010). The identification of mountains as a global issue appealed to us and the growing reference to “mountain women” intrigued us in this context. We wanted to examine the politics underlying the making of such a category but we also wanted to explore how such a reference could lead to the making of a collective identity offering opportunities for political movements and solidarities.

For this study, our major sources of information are documents, interviews and a survey. To understand the way “mountain women” and their contributions to sustainable mountain development are conceived in the global mountain agenda, we examined the corpus of texts and declarations stating the importance of mountains at the global scale, documents to which we refer as the “global mountain agenda”. Much literature can easily be considered to be part of the global mountain agenda, including scientific works that have contributed to putting the mountain theme on the international political agenda (Stone 1992; Messerli and Ives 1997). However, we chose to limit ourselves to official documents produced by the United Nations: i.e., “Chapter 13: Managing Fragile Ecosystems: Sustainable Mountain Development” of Agenda 21 – the action plan resulting from the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), paragraph 42 of the World Summit for Sustainable Development Plan of Implementation, United Nations resolutions (2002, 2003, 2005, 2006), UN General Assembly Reports (2003, 2005, 2007, 2009) and Reports to the UN Committee on Sustainable Development (1995, 2000), all of these being related to sustainable mountain development. In addition to these, we looked at documents offering elements complementary to the inclusion of women within the global mountain agenda, such as the report on the *International NGO Consultation on the Mountain Agenda* (1995).

To get a better sense of how women conceive of themselves and their contribution to sustainable mountain development, we looked at documents produced in the *Mountain Forum Women Discussion List*, a platform devoted to amplifying the voices of “mountain women” within the global mountain agenda. We reviewed the 770 e-mails that were exchanged on the platform between August 18, 1999 and December 15, 2009. These emails are available to the public through the online archives of the *Mountain Forum Women Discussion List*.<sup>3</sup> Prior to these archived exchanges, we examined excerpts from the first discussion on the list, condensed in a bulletin of the Mountain Forum (1999). Another major source was the publications produced in relation to two major international conferences devoted to “mountain women” – *Celebrating Mountain Women* (2002) and *Women of the Mountains* (2007) – and their consequent declarations. Major events that bring “mountain women” together from around the world as well as their resulting declarations help us to identify discourses claiming connections between women and mountains.

To further examine the motives and forms of the participation of women in the global mountain agenda, this research launched a specific survey.<sup>4</sup> A questionnaire was disseminated among “mountain women” networks between December 2006 and January 2007. The questions aimed at determining the activities carried out by these networks (theme, scale), their profile (membership), their perception of the adequacy of the global mountain agenda, and their participation in it. The questionnaire was distributed in four languages (English, French, German and Italian) electronically through the two main organizations promoting “mountain women” at the global scale, i.e. the *Gender Initiative of the Mountain Partnership* with its 39 members at the time of the survey and the *Mountain Forum Women Discussion List* with its 800 members. Twenty-seven questionnaires were returned, of which 20 had legible replies.<sup>5</sup>

The documentary sources and the survey were complemented by 12 semi-directed interviews. Because the survey yielded few responses and did not offer us all the answers we were looking for, we interviewed actors selected according to their current or historical involvement in “mountain women’s” networks and in the engendering of the global mountain agenda, e.g. attendees of the international conference *Celebrating Mountain Women* and members of the *Gender Initiative of the Mountain Partnership*. These 12 interviews, which ranged from a 15-minute telephone conversation to a 2.5-hour face-to-face discussion, were conducted to talk over the connection between women and sustainable mountain development, the benefits expected from these international exchanges and the impediments to the participation of women in the global mountain agenda.

In addition to these, one of this article's author led informal discussions with the organizers and participants to the international conference *Women of the Mountains*, held in March 2007 in Orem, Utah (USA). Moreover both authors invited three experts, selected for their involvement in the promotion of gender issues in the global mountain agenda, for a thematic session within the international workshop “Mountain Networks”, held in November 2007 at the Department of Geography of the University of Geneva (Switzerland). Both events allow the collection of complementary information and opinions.

### **The Discourses of the Global Mountain Agenda: *Mountain Women Matter!***

The United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), held in Rio in 1992, shed light on mountains by making them a global priority for achieving sustainable development (Messerli and Ives 1997; Debarbieux and Price 2008; Rudaz forthcoming). A specific chapter (Chapter 13) of “Agenda 21” – the action plan resulting from the UNCED – has been devoted to “Managing Fragile Ecosystems: Sustainable Mountain Development”. Following the UNCED’s tone, the issues are mainly framed in environmental terms. Mountains, depicted as environments “essential to the survival of the global ecosystem”, are primarily

identified as a source of key resources such as water, energy, biological diversity, minerals, forests, agricultural products and recreation (Chapter 13).

Chapter 13 of Agenda 21 refers four times to women, requesting their “full participation”. In the context of the UNCED, this discourse reflects the general gender mainstreaming of the conference, which led to the redaction of Principle 20 of the Rio Declaration<sup>6</sup> and of Chapter 24 of Agenda 21,<sup>7</sup> both devoted to women. Indeed, the UNCED and its preparations represented a new momentum in the claim of the specific role played by women regarding environment and development (Braidotti *et al.* 1994). This consideration of “mountain women” has been restated in subsequent declarations, such as in paragraph 42 of the Plan of Implementation of the World Summit for Sustainable Development (Johannesburg, 2002) calling for “gender-sensitive” policies and programs, and in United Nations General Assembly Resolutions (2002, 2003, 2005, 2006) and Reports (2003, 2005, 2007, 2009) concerning sustainable mountain development, where several sentences are specifically devoted to “mountain women”.

Mountains are referred to as a milieu that shapes the local content and character of women’s daily lives. Therefore, “mountain women” have been conceived as a category differentiated from other women, based on such geographical perspective highlighting the specificity of the mountain environment. A United Nations General Assembly Report from 2007 stressed such a view: “Mountain women face many of the same challenges that are faced by women throughout the developing world, but their work is intensified by altitude, steep terrain and isolation” (UNGA 2007).

Although women are identified as actors in the successful implementation of sustainable mountain development, their specific contributions to it are not well determined. Development practitioners from national aid agencies, NGOs and scientists, who have been key actors in the advocacy of a global mountain agenda (Debarbieux and Price 2008; Rudaz forthcoming), came to the conclusion from their field experience that addressing the environmental problems of mountains required the participation of women. More specifically, this perspective was based on a belief in a “natural convergence” between the environmental agenda and the women’s agenda (Byers and Sainju 1994, 220). This idea of convergence played a decisive role in the promotion of a gender approach in projects of sustainable mountain development. It was believed that as the agendas converged, the empowerment of mountain women would contribute to sustainable mountain development. The resolution “Sustainable mountain development”, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in March 2006, expresses such a perspective: “The General Assembly [...] underlines the need for improved access to resources for women in mountain regions as well as the need to strengthen the role of women in mountain regions in decision-making processes that affect their communities, cultures and environments” (UNGA 2006).



To promote the cause of mountains at the global level and to ensure the implementation of sustainable mountain development, an International Partnership for Sustainable Development in Mountain Regions, commonly and hereafter referred to as the Mountain Partnership, was created. Launched during the World Summit for Sustainable Development (2002) and hosted by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the Mountain Partnership is an umbrella alliance of organizations (IGO, States, NGO) involved in mountain issues. In the founding paper of the Mountain Partnership, the gender perspective is reaffirmed. Gender is mentioned as one of the 19 central issues related to sustainable mountain development. Among the eight “initiatives” of the Mountain Partnership, which are thematic platforms for exchanges and collaborative works among its members, one has been devoted to gender issues: the *Gender Initiative*. Consisting of about 50 members – 13 countries, 6 intergovernmental organizations and 28 major groups<sup>8</sup> – the initiative aims to “ensure that gender equity is mainstreamed in mountain development policy and action”. As the initiative website states, this goal is pursued “by encouraging women’s involvement in decision-making and by recognizing the crucial role women play as guardians of local resources and knowledge”.<sup>9</sup>

### **Promoting a Global Collective Identity and Action for Mountain Women: *We, Mountain Women, Matter!***

While the previous section focused on the establishment of a social category, here we focus on the building of a collective identity calling for action and around which political strategies and solidarities can be built. In the section devoted to our information sources, we stressed the role of platforms aiming at amplifying the voices of “mountain women”. In this regard, we look closely at two main platforms, selected because of their historical role in the promotion of the cause of “mountain women” at the global level. First, we pay specific attention to the *Mountain Forum Women Discussion List*, which has been the key network for discussing the condition of “mountain women”. Second, we consider the international conference *Celebrating Mountain Women*, which has been the major global gathering addressing the issues faced by “mountain women”. International conferences represent opportunities to build collective identities. As gender studies scholars have stressed, international gatherings provide women with a context through which women’s organizations “around the world can identify their mutual interests and develop effective transnational organizing strategies” (Naples and Desai 2002, 38). These two platforms have offered opportunities for transnational feminist action based on the claim of identity as “mountain women”.

#### *The Mountain Forum Women Discussion List*

Shortly after the community of mountain advocates celebrated the inclusion of mountains in Agenda 21, they began working on a better integration of NGOs active in mountain areas and

of mountain communities. In 1996, this effort led to the creation of the Mountain Forum, an electronic platform that encourages information sharing among its members, who have sustainable mountain development as a common agenda. In the network's preparatory meeting, the question of the participation of women and the necessity of a gender approach in development projects in mountain areas had been highlighted: "Since mountain women play a central role in the sustainable use and management of resources, the specific needs and constraints of mountain women must be addressed" (Mountain Institute 1995, Annex 1). In 1998, a subgroup focused on women was launched within the Mountain Forum: the *Mountain Forum Women Discussion List (MF Women List)*. On the Forum website<sup>10</sup>, it appears as an "open forum for discussion of issues related to women living in mountain environments". At its peak, the network comprised 800 members from around the world. When looking at the e-mail exchanges on the discussion list, one can observe a steep decline in the number of postings since 2008. The few 2009 contributions were largely digests of information related to gender issues. Compiled by the *International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD)* as internal documentation, these digests were made available through the *MF Women List*. At the time of writing, the *MF Women List* has been removed from the Mountain Forum's general internet site.

Soon after the network was launched, it was mobilized as a vector for building a collective identity as "mountain women". One of the most active advocates of this cause within the discussion list, Elisabeth Byers, from the Mountain Institute, stressed the importance of building a library of references related to mountain women "to indicate that indeed, there is an active constituency of mountain women" (E. Byers, posted 27 November 2000, mf-w<sup>11</sup>). The e-mails pointed to the hope that the International Year of Mountains would advance the cause of mountain women: "There are several of us who are trying to assure that mountain women have a voice within this year's events" (J. Gurung, posted 13 June 2000, mf-w). In another e-mail, Byers expressed the willingness to build a collective subject: "I would like to try to begin building a coalition for mountain women, which will be able to catalyze action for the International Year of Mountains" (E. Byers, posted 10 November 2000, mf-w). Many e-mails create a sense of pride among mountain women, highlighting their contribution to sustainable mountain development. For instance, a posting argues that women are the "real" mountain farmers, while another states that women in the Indian Himalayas have succeeded in managing forest in a sustainable manner, whereas state bureaucracy have failed.

The first e-mail discussion launched on the *MF Women List* is of special interest to us, as it aimed at defining the category "mountain women" and the issues these women are facing. This choice of topic is clearly a sign of an attempt to build a collective identity. This discussion entitled "Mountain women: moving forward amid changing environments and eroding status" was held from August to December 1998 and brought together 70 participants (Byers 2002). It was the first attempt to discuss the similarities of "mountain women's" conditions throughout

the world. Byers, as one of the three moderators of the discussion, noted: "I've seen a number of common challenges that mountain women seem to share, some of which even bridge the north-south divide" (quoted in Mountain Forum 1999). Participants in this discussion were eager to highlight similarities in "mountain women's" situations, such as heavy workload, male seasonal out-migration, poverty, lack of infrastructures and specific knowledge about mountain environments.

One of the moderators of the discussion, Jeannette Gurung from ICIMOD, raised the core question "Why women?" and answered it thus: "Because ideologies of development, religions, and nation state building do not recognize that mountain women may just not fit nicely into the way those in power have conceptualized women and gender relations, according to lowland and urban models" (quoted in Mountain Forum 1999). Gurung led a groundbreaking study, entitled "Searching for Women's Voices in the Hindu-Kush Himalayas" (1999) that reviewed the status of mountain women in Nepal, China, Tibet, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Bhutan, Afghanistan and India. This study is considered "a first attempt to reach out and consolidate mountain women's situation and perspectives on national and international policies and mountain development in general" (Thapa and Maharjan 2003).<sup>12</sup> The observations of Gurung's research helped define major points in the discussion about "mountain women's" "changing environments and eroding status". The study showed women's social status used to be better in many mountain regions than elsewhere. However, the integration of the mountain communities into national and global economies has had its gendered impacts (Mehta 1996) and the fundamental changes facing these communities are thought to be jeopardizing women's status: "Indications are that women's value in their households, communities, and societies is declining as traditional mountain societies are being transformed by the prevailing values belonging to lowland religious, nationalistic and cultural paradigms" (J. Gurung and G. Rana quoted in Mountain Forum 1999)<sup>13</sup>.

### *The International Conference "Celebrating Mountain Women"*

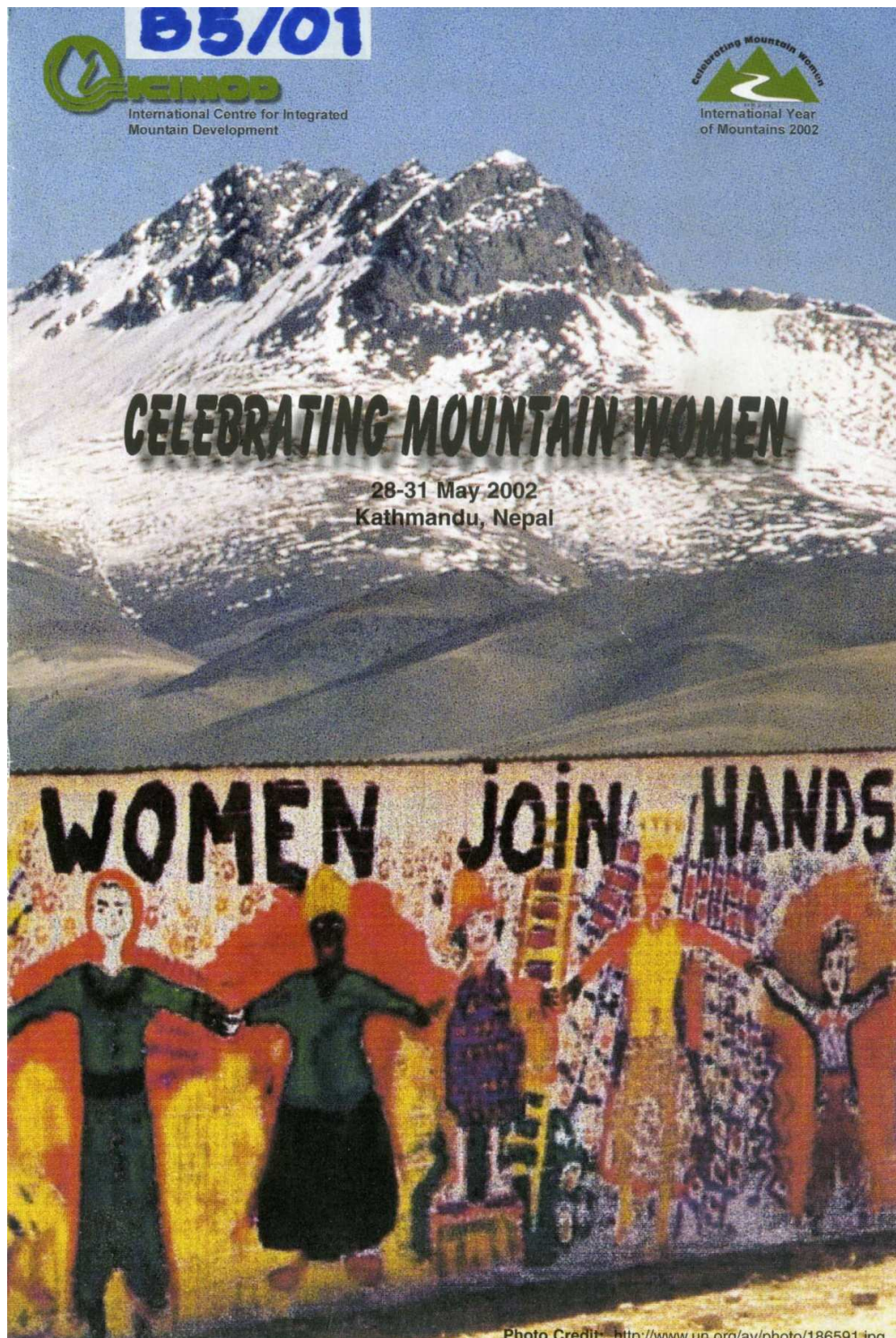
Few international conferences have been devoted to "mountain women". The main event has been the international conference *Celebrating Mountain Women*, CMW (Bhutan, October 1-4, 2002), which was "the first ever international gathering devoted to the issues and concerns of mountain women", as we noted in the introduction. A series of workshops and meetings preceded CMW. In 1988, the ICIMOD organized an "International Workshop on Women, Development and Mountain Resources: Approaches to Internalizing Gender Perspectives", in Kathmandu, Nepal (ICIMOD 1988). Since 1995, the Centre for Alpine Ecology (Italy) has organized a bi-annual international conference on "Matriarchy and the Mountains" (Zucca 1996). Two meetings held in Torino, Italy ("Women on the Climb", 27 September 2001) and Chambéry, France ("Women's roles in mountains", 30-31 May 2002) were organized as preparatory workshops for CMW. Five years after CMW, 110 participants from 20 countries

gathered at the *Women of the Mountains Conference* in Orem, Utah (USA), which produced the *Orem Declaration of Mountain Women*. This conference was intended to be held on an annual basis, but this option was withdrawn due to budgetary constraints; a second meeting was held on March 8 and 9, 2011.

The front page of CMW's internet site presented the event as a "unique opportunity to highlight the realities of life in the mountains and put women on the mountain agenda"<sup>14</sup>. The conference, therefore, explicitly pursued the goal of gender-mainstreaming the global mountain agenda. A good illustration of the intertwining of these two agendas was that the first step following CMW was to present the outcome of the conference to the international audience of the Bishkek Global Mountain Summit, the closing event of the International Year of Mountains, where all the key actors involved in the global mountain agenda gathered. The *Thimphu Declaration* was conceived "as a message from the mountain women" to the global mountain community and to the World Summit on Sustainable Development (Thsering and Thapa 2003, 8; FAO 2001). Mobilized and organized to produce and carry a "message", "mountain women" emerged as a political subject through the CMW process.

The establishment of such political subject and of the corresponding collective identity implies the identification of some commonalities among its various members. During CMW, it was proposed that women's situation was being challenged by dwelling in a harsh environment, as it was stressed in the global mountain agenda. CMW also reaffirmed the observation that while women's status was better in many mountain regions than elsewhere – "Because of the predominance of less rigid religious beliefs within the indigenous systems, and the dominant role of women in the livelihood systems of the mountains, mountain women have traditionally been afforded more freedom of movement, greater independence in decision-making, and higher status than women of the lowlands" (Tshering and Josse 2003, 3) – it was in danger due to increasing integration of mountain communities in national and global socio-economic systems. CMW emphasized the notion that belonging to marginalized societies is a major commonality among "mountain women". As pointed out by Tshering and Thapa (2003, v), while "women all over the world continue to struggle to be accepted as equals, to have their values recognized as relevant, and to overcome the multiple burdens of home and employment, [...] mountain women are further challenged as they belong to societies that are already marginalized and often cut off from mainstream of society". This double-marginalization, i.e. being a subaltern group in marginalized societies, is a central feature in the transnational discourses arguing for the specificity of the "mountain women's" condition (Thsering and Thapa 2003, 2).

Figure 1: Flyer announcing the “Celebrating Mountain Women” conference. © ICIMOD



The goal of the gathering was to achieve higher visibility for the contributions of women to sustainable mountain development. CMW intended to make visible the contributions of women, notably to development players, and to promote interactions between the two, as shown by the selection of participants, which included a number of development agencies (Tshering and Thapa 2003, 6). Indeed, scholars have denounced the fact that a number of development projects have bypassed women, whose sphere is considered to be limited to the household (Byers and Sanju 1994; Ives 1997). The highlighting of the broader contributions of women at various scales is intended to eradicate this bias. Seeking to give higher visibility to “mountain women”, the participants in the conference proposed in the so-called *Thimphu Declaration* the creation of a *Global Mountain Women’s Partnership* (GMWP), whose main objective was “to promote the interests and perspectives of mountain women and contribute to an improvement of their livelihoods” (in Tshering and Josse 2003, Annex 5). This statement is nothing less than a proposal to establish a lobby advocating the cause of “mountain women” at the global level, i.e. the clear affirmation of a political subject. The GMWP was officially launched during the Bishkek Global Mountain Summit. However, interestingly, the GMWP appears to have been a stillborn institution as it never carried out any activities. Members of the Mountain Forum and even attendees of CMW, whom we have interviewed, are not aware of the attempt to build such an organization. The fifth point of the *Thimphu Declaration* stresses the need for collaboration among “mountain women”, but it does not focus on the global level only; instead, it stresses the need to be active at various scales: “Without effective policies, networks, partnerships and alliances at the local, national, regional and international levels, mountain women’s economic, social and political marginalization will continue to hamper their development and the development of their communities”.

The discourses on “mountain women” appear to be fully embedded within the global mountain agenda. Indeed, all of these initiatives aim at mobilizing women to achieve sustainable mountain development. The opening statement of the *Thimphu Declaration* (2002), which began this article – “without women, it is impossible to achieve sustainable development in mountain areas” – is echoed by the first statement of the *Orem Declaration* (2007) claiming that “women play a crucial role in achieving sustainable mountain development worldwide”. Both statements illustrate that the goal is the implementation of sustainable mountain development and that women are considered to be instrumental in this plan. These declarations are clearly part of the global mountain agenda itself and women are perceived as key partners in carrying out this agenda. To claim that this goal is not achievable without women argues for their essential and full participation. This assertion represents an opportunity of positioning as political subject.



## **Women's Reflections on the Global Mountain Agenda: *Does It Really Matter?***

In the section devoted to the global mountain agenda, we saw that “mountain women” have been identified as key actors in sustainable mountain development. In the previous section, we observed that the participation of women in the global mountain agenda has met with little success. In this section, through information gathered from a specific survey and complementary interviews, we discuss further the difficulty encountered in the building of a collective identity as “mountain women”.

### *Speaking in the name of “mountain women”*

The interviews we conducted challenged our assumption that the platforms aiming at amplifying mountain voices actually strengthened the voices of the women concerned. Despite the impressive number of members on the *MF Women List* (800), some actors we interviewed contested the success of the platform, because it bypassed the women who needed it most: women who do not have internet access and who do not speak English. Some argued that the network concerns mainly academics and has little relevance for activists. A review of the e-mails exchanged on the *Mountain Forum Women Discussion List* shows a very large proportion of scientists. In their postings, these scientists stress the key role played by women regarding sustainable mountain development, in particular through their agricultural and forestry practices. Though these researchers certainly demonstrate empathy for and commitment to “mountain women”, they nevertheless maintain a certain distance from those who are not their peers but the subjects of their study.

CMW has been generally considered a success. However, some interviewees and survey respondents questioned the representativeness of the participants. Although indigenous women from mountain areas attended the conference, many “high profile” women, such as women officers of international development agencies, also attended. An interviewee and participant in CMW observed a kind of partnering within delegations: women who had a college education partnered with those who did not. Another more radically stated: “The main difference is that they work for women who are not of their kind and standard while I work with people who are like me”. We were further challenged by an expert who claimed that CMW was responding not to a request from “mountain women” but to a strategic positioning of an institution (ICIMOD) on the global scene devoted to mountains.

### *Mountain Women's Topics of Interest and Scales of Mobilization*

Some survey respondents stressed the desire for a mountain agenda as expressed by “mountain women”: “Women's participation in the improvement of the [global mountain] agenda is necessary, because one cannot feel the problems and difficulty that women are facing, except

women; since women's specificity can only be expressed by women". Although such a claim participates in the building of "mountain women" as a political subject, it does not specify what a mountain agenda as expressed by women would look like. Sustainable development for these groups appeared to be an objective. Yet although the questionnaires and interviews showed a general commitment of these groups to sustainable mountain development, most of them were eager to mention other objectives, which were sometimes more important for them: poverty reduction in mountain communities, health policies, skills development, etc. For instance, a women's organization from a remote part of the Hindu Kush, stressed the need to enhance the "earning capacity" of women, as during the winter season the region is cut off from the rest of the world and men out-migrate, leaving women as the sole economic pillar of the community. The mountain agenda is mainly oriented toward sustainable development, but "mountain women's" groups, although also committed to sustainable development, have other issues high on their own agendas. "Mountain women's" groups and conferences raise issues that are often forgotten or receive little attention within the global mountain agenda: health, entrepreneurship, education and violence are central concerns. Due to the origins, i.e. the UNCED, the mountain agenda is clearly oriented toward environmental issues. It was no surprise that the theme "Natural Resources and Environment" was the first of the five themes of CMW. The Appalachian Group "In Praise of Mountain Women" took advantage of this theme to connect with other mountain women's group worldwide. The group nevertheless needed to rephrase the topic: "Our first step was to write the themes in our mountain language: How we live here in the Appalachian Mountains (Natural Resources and the Environment) our health and well-being" (A. Leibig, posted 24 May 2002, mf-w). Significantly, an interviewee argued that a major reason for the marginalization of women in the mountain agenda is that mountains have been mainly conceived from a "naturalistic viewpoint". According to her view, mountain problems are thus mainly approached from an environmental perspective, with the socio-cultural problems being largely overlooked. But such an analytical perspective is marginal and there is a general consensus on the convergence of the environmental agenda and women's agenda.

Being members of global electronic networks related to the global mountain agenda, the groups who participated in the survey were informed about its aims and tools. Six of the groups were even founded in the context of the mountain agenda, such as the Akwapim Mountain Women's Forum (Ghana), which was launched as an outcome of the International Year of Mountains. However, participation in global mountain events has been rare (only three of the 20 respondents had participated in such events), partly due to lack of funding, and partly due to a manifest disconnection between local and global priorities. As a matter of fact, most of these groups have a local, sub-national or national scale of action. Although these groups are aware of the mountain agenda, the relationship between the local and global priorities is rather loose.



Few organizations are willing to identify themselves as groups of “mountain women”. Several interviews have shown that women prefer to define themselves as indigenous or to refer to tribes, ethnicities or cultures rather than to mountains for self-designation. A network active on the Asian continent highlighted this point in responding to the survey: “Most of our network members are all engaged in the indigenous people's movement towards the recognition of indigenous peoples' rights. We do not emphasize mountains in our agenda since most of us are in the mountains anyway but we do recognize the particularities of the mountain environment by which our cultures have actually developed around”.

Interviewees agreed on the finding that there is a gap between the invocation of “mountain women” and their concrete implications in the global mountain agenda. Nevertheless, the conversations showed major difficulties in pinpointing the reasons for such a gap. For the actors who participate in the global agenda and who are the most likely to be able to travel worldwide, the major impediment is the lack of funding to support women's attendance at meetings of the global mountain agenda.

Despite the often-mentioned pleasure of exchanges with “mountain sisters” from other parts of the world, survey respondents and interviewees could not mention tangible outcomes and benefits of the participation of women in the global mountain agenda in terms of improving the conditions and livelihoods of women in mountains. For those who are familiar with the global mountain agenda, there has been great disappointment with the evolution of the gender theme in the global mountain agenda. Many hopes had been raised with the conference Celebrating Mountain Women conference. The lack of follow-up after the event has been lamented. Nowadays, nothing makes us believe that there will be a “Celebrating Mountain Women +10”. Despite strong motivation, a “mountain women” organization which participated in CMW stated that eight years after the event, it was hard to know how to re-connect.

### **“Does The *Mountain Woman* Exist?”<sup>15</sup>**

The various transnational organizations, global events and declarations devoted to mountain women that we have reviewed in this article suggest that the demand to integrate mountain women into the global mountain agenda is more than an “add women and stir” process. For the promoters of the global mountain agenda, the crucial role played by mountain women in the management of the environment and natural resources renders their inclusion necessary. Their contributions are considered essential to sustainable mountain development, the target of the global mountain agenda. In parallel, global events devoted to “mountain women”, such as the ones at Thimphu and Orem, refer extensively to the global mountain agenda discourses and are definitely embedded in it. Indeed, transnational initiatives on “mountain women” do not follow an agenda of their own, but operate within the framework of the global mountain agenda. This

situation is illustrated by the fact that no institution represents the interests of “mountain women” at the global level, independent of the global mountain agenda. In this process, the category “mountain women” has been constructed in terms of social identity in order to integrate a gendered dimension into the general rescaling process required by the recent globalization of mountain issues.

Figure 2: Photomontage presented at the “Celebrating Mountain Women” conference illustrating the diversity of mountain women. © ICIMOD



Even though the making of such a gendered category appears to be relevant for actors with a global perspective on mountains, which is distanced from and syncretical of regional situations, the category is of little relevance for the primary subjects concerned – the women in the mountains themselves. This phenomenon can be partly explained by the themes addressed and the geographical scale mobilized. The social categorization within the global mountain agenda has also proven to have no tangible impacts that we could clearly identify or that “mountain women” advocating their cause could pinpoint. Indeed, one can hardly argue that mountain women’s lives have actually been improved through the attention drawn to gender dimensions of the global mountain agenda. Though “mountain woman” is a clear social identity within the

global mountain agenda, it has not yet evolved into a collective identity around which political solidarities and strategies would arise and ultimately ground collective action.

Indeed, “mountain woman” is not yet a common self-designation and, when it is, it is mainly grounded on local and regional references, many of which are related to indigenous belonging. A global mountain women identity still remains to be built, and for this to happen a clear identification of shared problems and objectives is required. As a matter of fact, most groups organized at a local or sub-national level seem more concerned with problems of daily life, many of them location-specific, than with an explicit commitment to sustainable mountain development. For these reasons, the voices of “mountain women” remain largely silent in the global agenda for sustainable mountain development and a “mountain women’s” agenda of its own is still to come. This situation, however, can change with time. If the leaders of the mountain agenda take into account more objectives of local women’s groups, if global networks and conferences devoted to women issues in mountain regions achieve greater visibility, then a “mountain women” collective identity, complementary to the global social identity, may emerge and become an efficient tool for connecting local networks and agendas.

Despite a growing reference to “mountain women” as a convenient social categorization within the global mountain agenda, with the help of a type of geographical region (“mountains”), such a self-designation has met with little success, as no tangible outcomes related to it can be identified. Because it is through specific cultures and societies that women’s statuses are constructed, facts of nature can hardly explain anything in this regard. In a number of cases, mountains have been invoked in claims of self-determination by communities. The invocation of mountains when considering women’s status is more challenging than referring to the type of society in which they live. Mountain people’s identities and women’s identities intersect with each other with little success, as collective identities related to mountains are heterogeneous by nature.

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comments and suggestions. We are grateful to ICIMOD for having granted the permission to use the two pictures for the purpose of illustrating the paper.

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Bernard Debarbieux is an ordinary professor in the Department of Geography and Environment, University of Geneva, Switzerland. During the last ten years, he has been working on the making and the use of natural and social categories in academic knowledge, in planning and in collective movements and identities. As an illustration, he focused on mountain regions and people.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> This is the first point of the Thimphu Declaration, adopted on October 4, 2002 in Thimphu, Buthan.
- <sup>2</sup> Long before the *Celebrating Mountain Women* conference, the role of women in the development of mountain communities and in the conservation of mountain environments had been acknowledged in various ways in different contexts. Several organizations such as "In Praise of Mountain Women" (Appalachia, USA), the Akwapim Mountain Women's Forum (Ghana), and the Himalayan Grassroots Women's Natural Resource Management Association (Nepal) have been built on an explicit link between women and sustainable mountain development.
- <sup>3</sup> <http://www.mtnforum.org/rs/dl/archives.cfm>. (accessed on April 29, 2009)

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- 4 The survey was part of a broader research project “A”, carried by the Department of Geography, University of Geneva, Switzerland, and funded by the Boninchi Foundation. The survey itself and several interviews were undertaken by Corinne Wacker.
  - 5 Initially, we were disappointed by the low level of response, but we discovered that an earlier survey on how to bring the Global Mountain Women Partnership to life met with similar results (F. Mees, posted 22 January 2004, mf-w).
  - 6 Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, Principle 20: “Women have a vital role in environmental management and development. Their full participation is therefore essential to achieve sustainable development”.
  - 7 Agenda 21, Chapter 24 “Global Action for Women Towards Sustainable and Equitable Development”.
  - 8 [http://www.mountainpartnership.org/initiatives/init\\_members\\_en.asp?id\\_init=2](http://www.mountainpartnership.org/initiatives/init_members_en.asp?id_init=2) (accessed on December 22, 2010).
  - 9 [http://www.mountainpartnership.org/initiatives/display.asp?id\\_init=2](http://www.mountainpartnership.org/initiatives/display.asp?id_init=2) (accessed on December 22, 2010).
  - 10 <http://www.mtnforum.org/rs/dl.cfm>. (accessed on May 2, 2009)
  - 11 Acronym of the Mountain Forum Women Discussion List indicating e-mails posted on the list. These emails are available to the public through the online archives of the Mountain Forum Women Discussion List (<http://www.mtnforum.org/rs/dl/archives.cfm>, accessed on April 29, 2009).
  - 12 More generally speaking, there definitely has been a “Himalayan bias” in the framing of the mountain women issue at the global level, which is acknowledged in a statement on the internet site of the Gender Initiative of the Mountain Partnership: “It is impossible to describe gender relations in all mountain areas. Every region has its own distinct cultural and environmental characteristics. This text relies on extensive research in the Hindu Kush-Himalaya” (<http://www.mountainpartnership.org/issues/gender.html>, accessed on May 15, 2008). Indeed, a great deal of the research on women in mountain areas has been carried out in the Himalayas, especially under the auspices of the ICIMOD, a regional organization working in the eight countries of the Himalayas.
  - 13 These trends have been a significant source of cooperation among mountain women in the Himalayas especially – the location of this observation (Gurung, 1999; Wymann von Dach, 2002, p. 236). For instance, the network *Himalayan Indigenous Women* was launched in 2005 in response to the observation that such women in Nepal are “intensively oppressed due to continuing racial, linguistic, cultural and religious discrimination” (<http://www.hiwn.org.np>, accessed on December 6, 2008).
  - 14 <http://www.mtnforum.org/calendar/events/0205mwaa.htm> (accessed on June 8, 2009)
  - 15 We are indebted to Susanne Wymann von Dach (2002) who raised this question in her article “Integrated Mountain Development: A Question of Gender Mainstreaming”.



