

# UPHILL TASKS WITHIN KUMAON HIMALAYAN COMMUNITIES: Multi-dimensional Gendered Inequalities in Everyday Life

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This paper contributes an ethnographically informed understanding of multi-dimensional inequalities in rural mountainous communities through a gender lens that focuses on the roles women perform as biologically, culturally, economically and geographically marginalised actors. It is based on a four-month study in a rain-fed agricultural region of the Kumaon Himalayas, and spans two districts of the Indian state of Uttarakhand with different farming profiles. The study employs qualitative methods to examine the impact of globalisation on women within changing rural contexts, identifying several crosscutting gender-related issues. Data analysis follows a grounded theory approach and reveals sets of intersecting inequalities which disadvantage these women, who are in vulnerable circumstances, through processes of globalisation that work in an exclusionary manner. By explaining these inequalities in a situated manner while emphasising their multi-dimensional nature, we present a nuanced account of women's roles in these changing rural societies, and thus foreground the material conditions of gender difference in everyday life.

**Keywords:** Kumaon Himalayas, intersecting inequalities, inclusive development, rainfed agriculture, gender, vulnerability

**T**he objective of this article is best explained within the historical context of gender and development in the Kumaon Himalayas. The Kumaon administrative division of Uttarakhand state in northern India is a mountainous region in the Himalayan foothills, characterised by rain-fed agriculture in the form of both subsistence farming and cash crops of fruits. In this state carved out of the northern reaches of developmentally-backward Uttar Pradesh state in 2000, infrastructure and governmental support remain a challenge, especially in hilly terrain that is home to remotely-located, small village communities (Kar 2007). A burgeoning population continues to exert pressure on the natural resource base it is heavily dependent on, such as forest wood for use as domestic fuel in rural households. The use of the Central Pahari language Kumaoni, spoken by over two million regional inhabitants, is challenged by the prevalence of Hindi as the official language for bureaucratic matters in the low-lying state capital Dehradun located in Uttarakhand's neighbouring Garhwal administrative division. This is symptomatic of the marginalisation of the general concerns of the Kumaon Himalayas and other hilly tracts in independent India's development planning and in a national push towards modernisation (Tomozawa 2014), which is embedded in the larger discourse of globalisation that has come to gain wide currency since the 1990s.

In the 1970s, independent India's Five-Year Plans for economic development aggressively promoted the Green Revolution as a national food security solution, investing in irrigated agriculture,

which favoured big commercial farmers in the plains but left out marginal farmers practicing rain-fed agriculture (Pingali 2012). Insufficient budget support to rain-fed agriculture, which comprises over two-thirds of India's farmland, has further marginalised farming communities in regions like Kumaon despite India's whole-hearted embrace of globalisation and recent emergence as a global economic force (Reddy & Mishra 2009). This is not for lack of progressive policies, which have steadily moved towards enabling inclusion through resource redistribution and affirmative action schemes as well as proportional representation premised on the recognition of differences along lines of caste, class and gender. Specifically, these efforts have taken the form of quotas for women, Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Other Backward Classes within India's decentralised multi-tier self-government institutions, development schemes such as the Public Distribution System which disburses subsidised grains and other necessities to poor households, and employment schemes to create manual labour opportunities that offer local livelihoods at the minimum wage level.

On the one hand, research suggests that the implementation of such policies leaves much to be desired, falling well short of achieving their intended objectives. It is well established that government schemes in India are seldom free of corruption and are difficult to implement and access (Sukhtankar & Vaishnav 2015). In Uttarakhand and elsewhere, 'seemingly participatory institutions can exclude significant sections' (Agarwal 2001: 1623). Women

comprise one such significant section in Uttarakhand: they continue to face different and greater obstacles for benefitting from modernising forces than men in the same communities despite, or perhaps because of, burgeoning processes of globalisation (Sarin 2001). Traditionally, women are placed at a disadvantage in terms of accessing benefits from development in areas such as health, education and natural resource management; this in turn holds back community development (Mikkola 2005). Women also bear greater burdens from environmental conflict (Ogra 2008) and 'survival work' around the household (Fracchia 2006), and find development a mixed bag rather than something positive according to their experience of it (Klenk 2004).

On the other hand, literature on the gendered aspects of development in the region conveys a rather different impression. Uttarakhand, which boasts a high forest cover (65%) and a literacy rate (79%) above the national average (Chandramouli 2011), is often associated with the eco-feminist icon of the 'chipko' movement of women who used their bodies to protect trees from being felled in Garhwal in the 1970s (Warren 1988). These women have been recognised as resisting unsustainable outcomes of modernisation in the form of natural resource exploitation (Shiva 1988) and as resisting alcoholism amongst male youth as a linked social movement (Pathak 1985). This organising capacity of Uttarakhand's women has also been noted in their recent participation in the movement for statehood (Gururani 2014; Sharma & Sudarshan 2010). Their role is also cited in Kumaon's pioneering of community-partnered natural resource management through village-based forest councils (van panchayats) from the 1930s onward (Agrawal 2005). Given the discourse around these initiatives and the contrasting claims above that Uttarakhand's rural women remain highly vulnerable in globalising India, literature addressing the multi-dimensional and in particular gendered nature of inequality in the region continues to point in strikingly different directions.

We aim to address this ambiguity in the literature and further an understanding of what determines inequality in regional development along lines of gender (Nightingale 2006). The guiding intent of this paper is to highlight the multiple dimensions that relate to a gendered understanding of inequality in Kumaon Himalayan communities, as identified by local community members themselves when discussing life in the mountains in general. We guard against a reductionist tendency to essentialise women as being necessarily close to nature or vulnerable by adopting a perspective from gender and development literature that sees gender as socially constructed (Mitchell 1996), approaching it as 'a problematic construct that is constantly restructuring itself' (Tripathy 2010: 113).

The results we put forward are based on an in-depth qualitative study, complemented by a nuanced understanding partly informed by discussions with staff associated with a non-governmental organisation (NGO) with 25 years of regional experience and partly by field observations. We argue that for globalisation to truly deliver its promised benefits to these Kumaoni communities, the exclusionary tendencies of linked processes must be considered in order to address the intersecting, gendered inequalities that shape their everyday lives.

### **Methodology: Local variation and hybrid methods**

This article is an outcome of an independent qualitative research study the authors conducted as volunteers with the Central Himalayan Rural Action Group (CHIRAG). Being located near CHIRAG's headquarters in Nainital district throughout the conceptualisation, the data collection and analysis phases of the project (October 2011 to January 2012) enabled insight into the ground realities of the region and communities under study. We obtained a historical understanding of regional development and details on basic characteristics of the communities from CHIRAG staff, and collected empirical data in villages where CHIRAG had conducted activities

targeted towards integrated development. Our association with CHIRAG thus served as a basis for introduction to interviewees during data collection.

We undertook fieldwork for two months across four separate areas with different agricultural systems in Nainital and Bageshwar districts. During this time, we conducted semi-structured interviews with 52 respondents (46% women) from separate households in 16 villages, interviewing between one and four respondents in each village. Each area had particular agricultural characteristics that impact women differently: households in Nainital district cultivated mainly fruit or other cash crops, while households in Bageshwar district primarily practiced subsistence farming. Moreover, we selected villages within each area that differed in key features such as distance from the road, access to forest resources, the lay of the land and the distribution of households within the village.

Interviews were conducted using an interview guide which aimed to give a deeper understanding of the broad-based development needs within communities. The three main foci in this guide were what the respondent thinks comprises a 'good life'; what the barriers to securing these components are for the respondent's household and community; and how individual agency and/or external support can enable a good life in this context. Rather than soliciting gender differences directly, we examined how such differences came to light naturally during discussions about everyday life and development overall (on situating knowledge and methodology, see Rose 1997). Interviews were conducted either in Hindi or, using an interpreter, in Kumaoni and Hindi, with both authors posing questions and one author translating simultaneously to English while the other took detailed notes.

We followed the constant comparative approach often associated with grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss 2009), and fashioned a design whereby the analysis and data collection iteratively informed and improved each other. We each conducted separate analyses, then shared our catego-

ries, jointly grouping them for each area. The same separate analysis and consultative process was repeated to pool categories across the four areas. We jointly identified the key categories based on emerging codes, and abstracted the crosscutting theme of gender inequality from trends observed across categories.

The codes within this particular theme comprise the self-expressed variables brought forward by respondents as reflecting gender inequality for community members. These codes form the focus of this paper and we present them as the key variables to target in order to address gender inequality and render processes linked with globalising India more inclusive in mountainous and other communities with rain-fed agricultural local economies.

## **Results: Multi-dimensional gendered inequalities**

The study areas represent rain-fed agricultural districts in a mountainous region of India. These are areas with steep slopes and depleted natural resources, limited services (e.g. healthcare and education) and in some cases lack of connectivity by road. For the most part, people rely on farming to get by, with farming methods informed by tradition – what their families have always done – as well as to some extent suggestions by trusted traders. While Bageshwar district's population is predominantly Hindu (99%), Nainital district's population has a more mixed profile, with 85% Hindu and 13% Muslim people (Chandramouli 2011). Villages in our study areas were predominantly Hindu, with households comprising joint families based on a patriarchal system. Sons typically built traditional houses called bakhliis adjoining their parents' home after marriage, and inherited farmland from their fathers. However, one respondent mentioned that with televisions becoming more common, young people's expectations of life are changing: "Ever since television has come, things are changing. People want to live like what they see." [Elderly male respondent, Gajaar Village] This change involved moving away from joint fam-

ily structures. While fathers want to keep families together across generations, sons want their own family in a more nuclear family setting. At the same time, trends associated with globalisation brought about an increase in consumerism – or the desire for it. Our respondent noted: “Agriculture is not enough for that kind of life” as it comes with its own weather and climate-related risks [Elderly male respondent, Gajaar Village].

However, the possibilities for income generation outside of agriculture are still limited in these areas. Very few individuals in households within each village had formal jobs; in the rare cases that existed, these took the form of relatively well-remunerated government posts. More commonly, households subsisted on farming and generated some income from minimum-wage labour employment through the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (known as NREGA) available to both sexes, in some cases combined with seasonal migration by men but never by women. In the study areas in Nainital district, fruit and cash crops also provided some income annually. A large portion of household needs were met through non-income-generating, natural-resource-based livelihood activities such as collecting firewood, water and housing material. Women bore the brunt of everyday labour demands associated with these environmental incomes and farming, with men chipping in where hard labour was required.

Several respondents mentioned a growing trend of people from ‘outside’ who have ‘deep pockets’ looking to buy second homes in the mountains. Seeing the potential for a quick win and better lives, some locals responded by selling off (parts of) their land. However, one respondent reported that selling land rarely led to better lives for the sellers, in fact, since “hardly anyone is able to use money properly” [Young female respondent, Newada Hamlet]. Despite money becoming available to buy assets like motorbikes and agricultural equipment or improving houses, these young female respondents agreed that selling land “ruins lives”, especially when more

liquidity resulted in higher consumption of alcohol. In another village, a young man replicated this sentiment: “If one’s land goes, everything goes – money does not last” [Male respondent, Chokhuta Village].

### *Exposure to the world and to modern lifestyles*

Many men migrate to cities for work, leaving women and children behind in the village to take care of land and homes. Male and female respondents alike overwhelmingly spoke of the opportunities available in cities for making money and the ease of access to modern facilities and amenities there, while also pointing out the flipside of the coin: the hustle, the lack of clean air, and the lack of community. Similar to what respondents mentioned about the influx of television, exposure to city life and modern amenities has introduced a generational gap in life expectations and savoir-faire. One mother told us: “My own son studied in the city and feels alienated from us. These areas lack facilities” [Female teacher, Dhutiya Village]

This generational gap is overwhelmingly gender-specific; respondents, especially in the more remote study areas, pointed out that most women lack exposure to the world and have not even visited a city. One woman, whose husband had lived in Delhi for a time, spoke of cities as places where you could learn something, learn a skill. However, when prodded about what kind of skill she might be able to learn, her answer revealed unfamiliarity and a sense of disempowerment regarding ‘making it’ in the city: “How am I supposed to know? Doing a job in Delhi is difficult. Here in the village, you know the people and you have support. There you need to figure things out by yourself” [Female respondent, Nayal Village].

This sentiment was supported by other respondents. One fairly well-off woman in her late forties mentioned that although “girls are brighter than boys ... it is difficult for girls to adjust to life in outside places, if they’ve always stayed at home.”

[Female respondent, Bohrakot Village].

Other respondents voiced frustration at women being denied knowledge and the opportunity to work outside the village stating that since they are working at home, they don't get to know about development and support schemes and don't get the opportunity to benefit from them: "Since we have no knowledge, we get no benefits" [Elderly female respondent, Chaugaonchhina Village]. In relation to this experience, they mentioned as a positive example a very active woman in their community who "goes to meetings all over to learn things that can benefit the village", indicating that such knowledge sharing can help other women improve their lots.

### *Life opportunities*

Women's opportunities in life were perceived to be much more limited than men's irrespective of a similar level of schooling for girls and boys in rural communities. Speaking of the experience of children growing up, a woman told us: "Now there's a pre-school, then they finish school, and then the girls are married off; they don't go to work. That's all there is in their lives." [Female respondent, Noyal Village]

While this reflection may be overly pessimistic – we did in fact meet female teachers, female heads of village, and women who had travelled all over India as spouses to men in the army – it seemed a common perception, and women, especially in the more remote areas, seemed to feel that opportunities for life improvement to a large extent passed them by.

A combination of high domestic work burdens and very few opportunities for paid employment keep women bound to house work. Tasks such as fetching water, fodder, cattle bedding and fuel-wood (often from kilometres away, or uphill), as well as farm work, tending to the cattle, cooking and looking after children, are all the responsibility of women.

When questioned about the opportunities for development of microenterprise – work that women could do at home, for instance – one young man who had worked both in Bombay and Delhi dubiously responded: "What's possible for women? They have so much work at home... maybe some stitching..." [Young male respondent, Chaugaonchhina Village]

One opportunity for income generation widely available to women is manual labour through the NREGA scheme. A village health worker in Satbunga Village told us that "it is mostly women who use the scheme, because men can earn more elsewhere. Women will get at least 100 days, maybe more."

### *Voice and empowerment*

"I am not educated. I know nothing." [Female respondent, Gajaar Village, upon our requesting to interview her]

Despite the higher work burden of women, respondents generally said that men held control of household finances and it was not normal for women to have their own income. Knowing little about money and not having independent means of livelihood, women often lacked control over their lives: "Women have no idea about what the crops bring in – even though they do all the work, it's the men who bring crops to market and handle finances" [Male respondent, Gajaar Village]

While stating that for women's lives to improve, they needed to feel confident and empowered, respondents emphasised that the lack of legal entitlement would restrict such opportunities. In some areas characterised by a high level of male alcohol consumption, respondents stated that men squandered much of the money (e.g. on alcohol and gambling), and as women not earning their own income, they were forced to put up with this and even domestic abuse. When prodded about women's voice, one respondent retorted: "Voice? What voice? There's so much alcohol in the village, the men



come home and create trouble and then there's no food and you to go bed hungry [...] No woman can speak up against her husband." [Female respondent, anonymised village].

This woman had been chosen as sarpanch (head of village) as a result of an imposed quota for women and her being the most educated. In addition, she worked as a community health worker but told us that despite doing all the household work: "I still get sworn at for working outside and yelled at – what is a woman in that position to do?"

Domestic problems would often not be addressed within the community, not even in more serious cases by public law enforcement officials, because, as she said: "We feel afraid to go out and ask the police" and despite the fact that the sense of community between women was strong and developed through the time they spent sharing each other's company during daily chores like collecting grass and fetching water: "There's no unity for doing anything about these things".

In other villages, the experience of the women was not as dismal. One female respondent said: "Sometimes the woman has to listen to the elders or to the husband, but sometimes the husband also has to listen. In this house, it's equal."

This respondent also reflected on women's need to ensure their own agency upon moving to their husband's village as a bride, while still recognising that not all women are able to:

Regardless of whether I'm right or wrong, it's important that I speak. Otherwise ... they'll think I don't have the right to speak. In some places, it's like that – the woman will hesitate so much, she won't even tell us her name. [Female respondent, Udaidkhani Village].

The lack of women's individual empowerment was also reflected in their rights to their own bodies. Respondents said elders within the household, sometimes with inputs from village elders, decided how many children a woman should have, and women

felt the pressure of tradition to make ritual sacrifices after giving birth, especially to a son, such as being obliged to have a very restrictive (and unbalanced) diet for a long period after the birth despite breastfeeding. Tradition also prevented women who were widowed early from remarrying, although in some cases this had certain positive implications: "Widows have better economic conditions [i.e. without men] because they do not spend money on other things", estimating that some men spent almost two-thirds of monetary household income on alcohol. [Male Respondent, Gajaar Village]

### **Discussion: The gendered impact of globalisation in the Kumaon Himalayas**

The above findings on exposure to the world and to modern lifestyles, life opportunities, and voice and empowerment, reveal a persistently gendered picture of Kumaoni development even as globalisation changes people's aspirations. Villagers are drawn by modern lifestyles and dissatisfied with a future based on the uncertainties and economic limits of subsistence agriculture; yet selling farmland is generally regarded as a mistake since inhabitants lack financial management skills, which renders other investments less secure than land ownership. Indeed, women continue to worry about male spending on alcohol (Pathak 1985), except now with the threat of losing irreplaceable windfall gains from the sale of land. Despite the lure of urban jobs, only men migrate seasonally for work while women shoulder heavy domestic 'survival work' like fetching fuel wood and water, tending to children, cattle and farmland, cooking and doing routine house maintenance tasks (see also Fracchia 2006).

As the sub-section on exposure to the world and to modern lifestyles shows, this gender divide extends to opportunities for acquiring knowledge and skills, which are consistently denied to rural women despite their wish to participate in life beyond their village and traditional subjugated roles. In this manner, gendered roles are socially constructed (Mitchell 1996); exceptional cases demon-

strate that some empowered, proactive women can encourage and mobilise others to redress such entrenched social inequity (Mikkola 2005). Yet this sort of exception is at quite a remove from the powerful roles ascribed to women in pre-globalisation community forestry (Agrawal 2005) and environmental resistance (Shiva 1988) movements in Uttarakhand's history.

The sub-section on life opportunities shows that while development schemes do provide women with some local livelihoods, these are not accompanied by political representation and inclusion, as Sharma and Sudarshan (2010) argue for rural Uttarakhand, but rather by acute awareness of the highly circumscribed nature of their options (Sarin 2001). By and large, as Klenk (2004) also argues, women's futures are determined in line with traditional gendered expectations. Being born female drastically restricts their life choices to marriage, back-breaking domestic duties and farm work, in a manner reminiscent of 'participatory exclusions' systematically premised on gender (Agarwal 2001).

Most worryingly, the sub-section on voice and empowerment reveals the enormous power men wield over women, especially within the household, in terms of financial decisions, domestic violence linked with alcoholism, and child-bearing. Many women are not allowed to co-determine how household income is spent, whether land is sold or not, how and where they live their lives, and sometimes even how many children they may have. This marginalisation is based on intersecting biological, cultural, economic and geographical dimensions of life in the mountains (also see Elmhirst & Resurreccion 2008). Women's lack of individual empowerment is visible in terms of their limited access to knowledge, independent income, voice, and legal protection (Klugman et al. 2014). This points to multi-dimensional, gendered inequalities: women are multiply marginalised to such an extent that they are culturally, economically and geographically unable to address the gendered inequalities they face due to their biological identity (Rocheleau et al. 2013). The

dynamic nature of gender (Tripathy 2010) is weakened by limits over women's will and agency.

The findings of this qualitative study thus show marked differences in Kumaoni men's and women's knowledge of and exposure to the world outside their agrarian mountain communities. We saw little evidence of modernisation of agriculture despite the Green Revolution (Pingali 2012; Reddy & Mishra 2009). Rather, in these areas, globalisation has enabled quick access to money for men based on selling land to 'outsiders' and given rise to aspirations of the youth to live modern lifestyles, neither of which appear to be sustainably improving lives in these communities. Stories of children educated and working in cities feeling alienated from their parents and from their home communities, of young men frustrated at seeing amenities on television that remain unavailable to them, and of alcohol and one-off influxes of too much money 'ruining lives' (villager's words) present a picture of the burgeoning processes of globalisation not being routed in beneficial ways towards these mountain communities (Tomozawa 2014). This study shows women to be disadvantaged in these and most other processes (Nightingale 2006).

The bias in favour of males is also reflected in demographic statistics. Uttarakhand's female to male child sex ratio (0-6 years) is 890 (girls for every 1000 boys) which trails behind India's national female to male child sex ratio of 919 (Chandramouli 2011) suggesting a disheartening likelihood of female foeticide despite laws banning prenatal sex determination, as well as better nutritional outcomes for male infants. Almost 15% of women between 20-24 years of age are married before the age of 18, and a gender literacy difference between the sexes of 17 percentage points (pp) persists with 87% of males being literate compared to 70% women in Uttarakhand (ibid.).

The trends emerging from this qualitative study suggest that addressing Uttarakhand's developmental challenges within globalising India entails apprehending the variety of exclusionary ways in



which globalisation does or does not affect the lives of people and the implications thereof, especially for women, in Uttarakhand's rain-fed agricultural communities (Afshar & Barrientos 1999; Mikkola 2005). We have demonstrated some specific forms these exclusions take in two mountainous districts of Uttarakhand. These remain rather removed from the stories of globalising India as an emerging power that have otherwise captured the popular imagination courtesy the spectacle-making of nation-building that dominates mainstream discourses.

### **Conclusion: Addressing gendered inequalities for development**

Our study provides evidence of deep-seated gender inequality within communities, which is being compounded rather than mitigated by modernisation and globalisation processes. Marginalisation based on gender was present across communities regardless of differences in remoteness and livelihood profiles (cash-crop versus subsistence farming). Government schemes and larger processes linked with globalising India have done little to target these realities of everyday life in the Kumaon Himalayas that are so critical towards the integration of mountain communities in the national and global economy (Sukhtankar & Vaishnav 2015). Interventions by public services and actors in development in this and comparable regions need to acknowledge and address these intersecting inequalities (Kabeer 2010; Kar 2007). This study suggests that to truly empower communities and bring the purported benefits of globalisation to them, development interventions must respond to gendered inequalities by targeting the factors that exacerbate or keep them entrenched. It furthers our understanding of what these factors currently are in the Kumaon Himalayas.

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