The Role of Women and Gender in Climate Change Adaptation: Agency, Experience and Knowledge from the Greater Himalayas

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One of the greatest challenges facing future adaptation efforts is balancing the need to fill critical gaps in research with the need to urgently strengthen both autonomous and development-supported action. In the fragile environments of the greater Himalayas, climate vulnerability, adaptation, risk, and agency are shaped and magnified by gender – as socially-constructed norms, discourses, institutions, and relations limit access and control over resources and participation in decision-making, and often skew gender divisions of labour and power relations to women’s disadvantage. A multitude of forces further exacerbates the situation, including migration, globalization, land use, the dominant emergence of neo-liberal and positivist discourses and practices, and the immense socio-cultural, political-economic and ecological diversity in the region. In the face of such complexity and diversity, ethnographic and gender analysis is critical for deepening knowledge and designing practical actions that make a real difference. However, these approaches face several challenges within a field often dominated by technical fixes alone. HICAP is one of the first programmes of its kind to attempt to tackle such complexity within an action-oriented and trans-disciplinary approach, while keeping the role of gender and women’s agency at its centre. This paper explores challenges, opportunities, and preliminary findings, including a conceptual framework. It argues that the most important basis for understanding future adaptation from a gender lens is to examine the ways in which knowledge, culture, and power shape disciplinary and institutional discourses and practices of development, as well as the way they interface and disconnect with the everyday practices, knowledge, and agency of differently positioned women and men in sustaining their environments in a complex and changing world.