

Message from the Director General

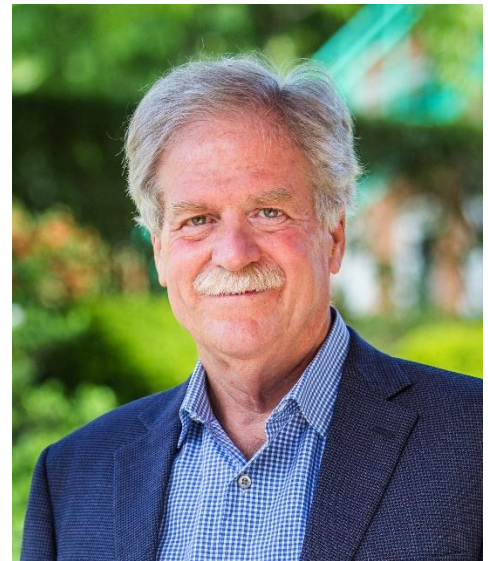
INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY 2020

EachforEqual: Changing self for equality in the HKH

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The fight for gender equality is a continuous process that starts with each of us. It is time to introspect and challenge our own hidden biases for true change.

Today, the topic of gender equality has gained visibility in all spheres of life, penetrating the public consciousness and discourse even in remote mountain areas. Gender inequality is one of the most significant barriers to human development – it impacts at least half of us. And there is recognition of this fact. Gender is importantly a major focus in the development field, where the need for women's representation in decision making is very apparent. Most of us “expect” gender equality and parity, and we do not buy into old-school explanations for patriarchy. Stereotypes and blatant biases based on gender are more likely to be called out and challenged in the modern age.



Despite these seemingly promising advances, the [Human Development Report 2019](#) states that the “proportion of people biased against gender equality has grown over the last few years”. It has actually been incredibly difficult to break down deeply ingrained mindsets that still view women as the “weaker” (often equating to “inferior”) sex. This mindset still persists worldwide – as it certainly does in mountain communities. And this manifests in a sharp inequality of power that men and women exercise at home, in the workplace, in politics, or in decision making. The reality is that too many people are satisfied with maintaining this status quo, all the while posturing as progressive by merely engaging in the conversation. We need a real shift in our mindsets – and we need our actions to be informed by that change.

It is time to introspect and check our biases. It is time to challenge this status quo at a personal level – as individuals and as professionals. Let us not hide behind groups, societies, organizations, institutions in this fight for equality. Let us recognize that it is we as individuals who make up these groups, societies, organizations, and institutions. And our institutions will not change unless we change. Each one of us needs to urgently reflect on our beliefs, attitudes, behaviours, and roles in perpetuating such inequalities that reinforce the unequal status quo, and change ourselves from within to create balanced and gender-equal communities. We need to be involved in advocacy, inclusive practices, and tangible actions – a personal, committed journey towards correcting imbalances and injustices.

Women are doing their part, but the systems are failing them. Our studies in the HKH have shown that [increasing outmigration](#) of (mostly) men to urban areas is [altering gender roles](#) and changing spaces and domains of women and men. Being pushed into new roles and spaces, women are taking on roles and responsibilities in all spheres (private and public), enhancing their capacities and skills in the process. Yet, their contributions to society are under-valued. For instance, they are still “helpers” and not “farmers”, and they are “working mothers/women”, implying that their first duty is household work. The structural inequalities remain intact. Women’s involvement in decision-making bodies also remains minimal. Institutional structures and processes remain patriarchal and largely male-dominated, resulting in policies that remain biased against women. For instance, employment and land tenure policies still favour men in most countries in the HKH. Again, even as women face increasing insecurity because of the new roles and spaces they are pushed into, their ability to access mechanisms for protection and redressal is still restricted, and corrective policies are often still limited. Therefore, we need to reform such systems, and men working with women will be key to that reform.

Change starts from our own homes and work places through a concerted effort to reflect on everyday interactions with women. Each of us need to call out the discriminatory norms and practices that are taken for granted and take active steps to throw off such yokes of gender inequality.

At ICIMOD, our big self-change is the addition of gender equality and inclusive development as one of our strategic results. Our success is measured on whether or not we contribute to this result, and it is reflected in our planning and review processes. Another big step we have taken in 2019 towards changing ourself is the adoption of the “Policy and Procedures on Prevention and Redressal of Sexual Harassment at the Workplace”.

On this International Women’s Day, let us pledge to change ourselves – to address inequality; to end bigotry; to challenge the status quo; and to change women’s positions and status in households, work places, and society. Let us not stop fighting for what is fair, just, and right. Let us all be **#EachforEqual**.