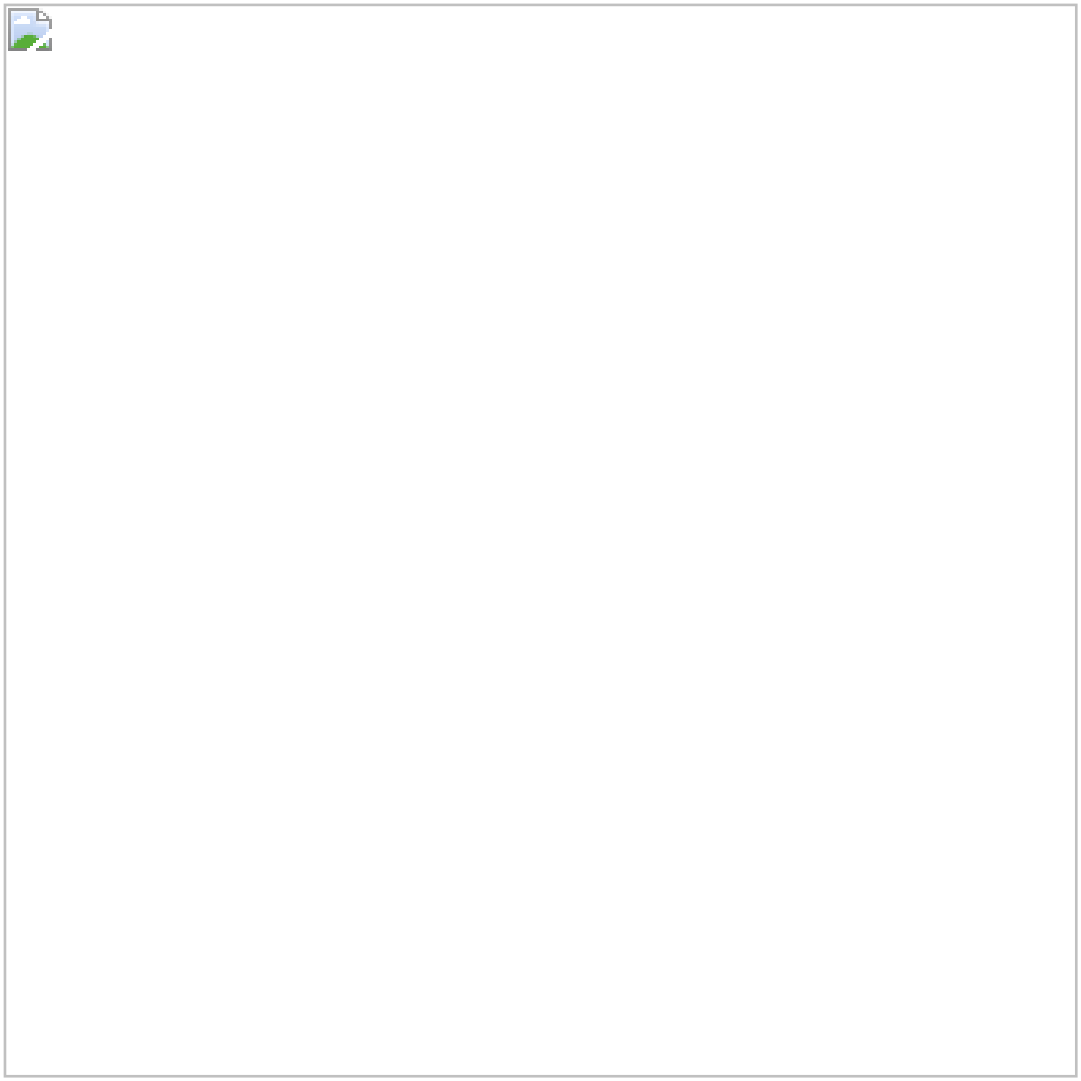

Mountain Women, Dams, and the Gendered Dimensions of Environmental Protest in the Garhwal Himalaya

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Mountain Women, Dams, and the Gendered Dimensions of Environmental Protest in the Garhwal Himalaya

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Mountain women's resistance to inequitable development practice manifests itself in several ways; one of the most visible ways is their campaigning with social movements. The efforts to save the Ganges (Ganga) River from hydroelectric dams in the Garhwal Himalaya of Uttarakhand, India, are a case in point. Within these movements, men often take leadership roles, while women from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds form the base of participation at meetings, assemblies, and rallies. Based on ethnographic research from 2007–2010, this article explores the particularities of women's engagements with dam opposition efforts, their motivations for activism, and the degree to which their concerns for environment and development receive attention. Although women make extensive contributions, movement leaders often do not adequately represent the specifics of their development concerns, and this impacts the ability of policy-makers to respond to women's demands. This article shows mountain women's locations on multiple social and geographic peripheries and argues for more gender sensitivity and critical reflection in social movement campaigns and decision-making processes as a prerequisite for expanding the possibilities of gender-inclusive sustainable development.

Keywords: *Mountain women; dams; development; resistance; social movements; Garhwal Himalaya.*

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Gender, mountains, and environmental social movements: An introduction

Environmental and sustainable-development campaigns in the Indian Himalaya often have high participation by mountain women, yet the scholarship on social movement processes can at times be superficial in its treatment of gendered dynamics and disparities. This article argues that such omissions can hinder attempts to address women's specific concerns for regional ecologies. Inattention to women's participation in such movements can also limit efforts to be gender-sensitive in the promotion of equitable environmental initiatives.

The assertion that women's efforts in Indian environmental campaigns can be overlooked may sound odd to those familiar with high-profile movements in the plains and the Himalaya. In the plains, Medha Patkar famously served as a prominent figure in the movement against the Sardar Sarovar hydroelectric projects on the Narmada River (Fisher 1995). Her coordination and sacrifice in what became the Naramada Bachao Andolan movement, however, received more international attention than the efforts of the tribal women she worked with, pointing to the challenge of creating truly representational politics (Baviskar 1995). In the Himalaya, one of the most famous movements in the late 20th century was the Chipko Andolan, an effort to protect trees that was at its zenith in the mid- to late 1970s. Yet, work on the Chipko movement has vacillated between extremes that either asserted women's "natural" affinities with the forest and with "nature" or relegated them to the backdrop of a grand confrontation with logging corporations and the state in which a few vocal men were the most prominent spokespersons (Haigh 1998; Bandyopadhyay 1999; Rangan 2000a; Linkenbach 2007).

Regardless of Chipko's legacy, contemporary writings on social movement campaigns in the Indian Himalaya tend to highlight the actions of a select number of vocal leaders, mostly men, with an occasional nod toward the mountain women with whom they stand in solidarity (or who stand in solidarity with them). Moving against this trend, this article highlights the role of Garhwali women in a particular set of social movement campaigns contesting the construction of 3 hydroelectric dams on the Bhagirathi, a tributary of the River Ganges (henceforth the Ganga), which flows from the Gaumukh glacier in Uttarakhand State.

In showing how and why mountain women were involved in the campaign, I advance 4 main points. First, the concerns that motivated Garhwali women to participate in the opposition to the dam were based on

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mountain-specific concerns and grievances that merit policy-level engagement. Second, women were instrumental in the movements regionally, but their roles were downplayed by the men who rose to national prominence in those movements. Third, the lack of collaborative engagement and attribution of women's vital roles in the campaigns ultimately undermined the claims of promoting justice and sustainable development made by movement leaders. Finally, insights from feminist political ecology suggest that enhanced gender sensitivity in social-movement and civil-society processes is a prerequisite for expanding the possibilities of gender-inclusive measures to foster sound and regionally appropriate development measures.

The arguments put forth are based on fieldwork in Uttarakhand, North India, over 16 months from 2007 to 2010. During that time, I attended 24 events that either opposed or promoted the construction of dams on the River Ganga. Part of my work in documenting these campaigns was to understand multiple perceptions of development with an emphasis on the concerns voiced by mountain-based residents (as opposed to city-based activists and decision-makers living in the plains). An additional component of my research was to highlight mountain women's concerns regarding dams on the Ganga—a river that all of my respondents revered as a living goddess that was significant to their daily lives—and their efforts to raise awareness about the river's plight. To that end, I observed women's involvement in movement campaigns, questioned them in semistructured interviews, and conducted 11 life-history interviews to document women's experiences and motivations.

Although the research aimed to highlight mountain women's concerns for "sustainable development," this was not a term with which my interlocutors expressed familiarity. What I documented, instead, was the intermingling of livelihood preoccupations with concerns for safeguarding the meaningful socio-religious activities that the Ganga enables. The latter included the responsibility that people felt to protect the river's flow in important locations for the benefit of future generations. Such discourse has parallels with sustainable development frameworks, but it integrates, almost in equal measure, the maintenance of meaningful cultural and religious practices with demands for water resource access and the support of mountain livelihoods (Drew 2012).

Mountain women and mountain concerns

There are a number of issues to unpack in making the arguments that follow. To begin, references to "mountain women" or even "Garhwali women" are not intended to homogenize a diverse set of actors with distinct daily practices, geographic and kinship contexts, religious orientations, and livelihood struggles. Garhwali women speak a number of languages (including 4 dialects of Garhwali), enact a variety of cultural and religious practices, and come from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds with varying degrees of social mobility. It is also important to note that, over the last 2 to 3 decades, the region's growing towns and urban centers have witnessed a rise of immigration wherein women with roots in the Indian plains are moving to the mountains with their families. They bring with them personal, cultural, and political orientations that can influence, or come into tension with, those of the women born in Garhwal. These plains-born women may eventually come to view themselves as Garhwali (even if only in part), and their children may also identify as such. The category of Garhwali women, in other words, should be understood to represent the above-mentioned geographic and socioeconomic diversity and fluidity of identities.

Even though women in Garhwal come from a variety of backgrounds and have disparate interests and experience, concern for the Ganga's longevity and continuity of flow united many in opposition to the implementation of large run-of-river dams in Uttarkashi District. These dams redirect water into tunnels, where they generate electricity from the rushing flow rather than from reservoirs. Women's concerns for the redirection of the Ganga were as numerous as their backgrounds and did not reflect an inherent connection to "nature" in ways that were different from those of men (Ortner 1974). Some women worried about their daily access to the river's life-giving waters, some expressed fears for the maintenance of cultural and religious rites that depended on the river, some worried that a loss of flow in the riverbed would lessen the spiritual vibrations of the sacred space that the river delineates, and others voiced concern about the future water balance of the region.

With such concerns in mind, the number of antidam campaigns increased after the construction for 3 hydroelectric projects became visible in 2006–2007. The dams had government clearance based on a government-approved environmental impact assessment and the presumption that public consultations on the projects had taken place with villagers. In the dam opposition campaigns that I attended, villagers asserted that they had not been consulted or alerted prior to the dams' construction. Several women argued that had they known of the destruction the dams would cause, they would have launched their opposition sooner.

The road construction, dynamite blasting, and tunnel drilling that were required to create the run-of-river projects had several impacts that motivated the opposition response (Figure 1). Residents noted that land became destabilized, resulting in landslides, springs began to dry mysteriously, dust pollution increased, and crops were compromised. Similar impacts of hydroelectric construction have been noted in other parts of the Himalaya, such as in the northeastern Indian state of

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FIGURE 1 Road construction and water diversion for the Loharinag Pala Hydel project. (Photo by Georgina Drew)

Sikkim (Chandy et al 2012). Some of the construction activities involved occasional roadblocks and other disturbances that hindered the flow of pilgrimages and tourism, a seasonal mainstay of the regional economy. Several fatal car accidents were also attributed to the hastily created infrastructure, including roads that crumbled under the weight of large vehicles. In 2009, a bus with schoolchildren, teachers, and villagers tumbled down a ravine near a dam construction site. Several other cars suffered similar fates, though it is difficult to tell whether the cause was the roads or the monsoon rains that chip away at the hillsides.

When asked, many of those affected by the dam construction stated that they felt that they had very little to gain from the projects. The electricity that was to be generated, with an estimated capacity of 1145 MW for all 3 projects, was to be transferred to the Indian plains to drive the nation's economic activity. Although Uttarakhand State stood to gain 12% of this energy back at no charge, residents near the dams complained bitterly that the electricity in their homes—when they had any at all—was expensive and that the prices only seemed to rise despite the increase in the number of Himalayan dams. There was, in other words, a clear question about who stood to gain from the construction and operation of the new projects.

Beyond the issue of hydroelectric development, the dams represented a pattern of Himalayan resource exploitation that has historically angered many in the Garhwal mountains. Prior to 2000, the ethnolinguistic regions of Garhwal and Kumaon were part of Uttar Pradesh, a state with a population of some 200 million and a capital, Lucknow, located far away. Many people in Garhwal and Kumaon asserted that the policy-makers in the capital treated their homeland primarily as a source of raw materials and tax income and that few of the Lucknow-based policies were designed to make life in the mountains better or more prosperous. A series of social-movement and civil-society campaigns ensued. Rangan (2000b) provides vivid accounts of these encounters, and Mawdsley (1998) documents the role of women in the

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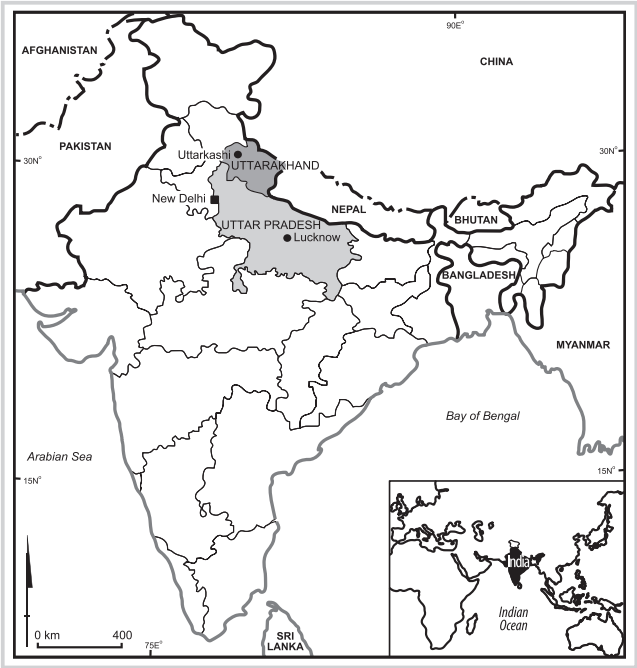
FIGURE 2 The state of Uttarakhand, which achieved independence from Uttar Pradesh in 2000. (Map compiled by Chris Crothers, Department of Geography, Environment & Population, The University of Adelaide)



political process, including the violent attacks that women suffered. Following a hard-won battle for an independent state, the dams on the upper Ganga symbolized for some a repetition of mountain resource exploitation. It also triggered latent frustrations that even in the newly founded Uttarakhand State (Figure 2), policy-makers were failing to live up to promises they made to promote mountain-centric development.

The gender dynamics of social movement campaigns

Although women took active roles in the opposition to large hydroelectric dams along the Ganga, their involvement was not always publicly acknowledged, as a small circle of men dominated the media spotlight. Women can experience such dynamics as a form of silencing. At the same time, women recognize—as we similarly should—that they can be important if not essential sustainers of movement networks and shapers of consciousness (Brodkin 1988; Stephen 2011). Stephen (2011: 179) discusses Oaxacan women in Mexico who opposed government policies by taking over a radio station to articulate gendered rights including the "right to speak," the "right to be heard," and the "right to decide who governs."

In interviews regarding their participation in opposition to dams on the upper Ganga, women similarly said that they had rights (*haq*, a Hindi term), including a right to debate how their river should be managed. Although women did not directly assert the rights to speak and be heard, they did demand such rights in movement meetings and campaigns by using a tactic that can be labeled "overspeak"—an effort to deliberately speak or sing over men's comments and conversational domination. Overspeak was not only gendered but could include class and age hierarchies among women. The women who most often engaged in overspeak had already established themselves as leaders among the other women, due either to their elevated roles in other committees and social hierarchies or to their past campaign accomplishments.

A meeting in April of 2009 demonstrated how women worked to voice their concerns for the Ganga and its management. A group known as the Clean the Ganga Movement, or Ganga Safai Abhiyan, sponsored the event. Members—the majority of them women—had been active in cleaning the banks of the Bhagirathi Ganga in the district capital of Uttarkashi since the early 1990s. Much of their annual work took place in the weeks before the celebration of Makar Sankranti, which happens in mid-January. The cleaning campaigns were initiated to honor this event and to raise awareness of the need to protect the Ganga and the environment. One woman who related the details of their organizing indicated that they had been involved in antiliquor and antimeat campaigns before they started cleaning the river. Movements against alcohol consumption were especially prominent in the 1980s in the Himalayas (Pathak 1985), and women were often the lead organizers of such campaigns.

In light of the concerns about the ecological transformations taking place in and upstream of Uttarkashi, Clean the Ganga Movement members gathered to brainstorm ways to raise awareness of the costs and dangers of hydroelectric development. Even though the female-to-male ratio was 12 to 6, the men led the meeting and did most of the talking. When the discussion opened, the women tried to make suggestions, but their comments were often ignored. Some women shouted to be heard. Their voices sounded aggressive, yet they were effective in gaining attention. The comments by the women who were unwilling to shout, by contrast, fell on deaf ears. In only a few instances were the more self-assured women able to demand that the group listen to these soft-spoken utterances.

Although 2 women had been acknowledged as important and long-standing participants in the Clean the Ganga Movement, even these women had to speak aggressively to make themselves heard. They had an especially difficult time getting the group's attention when they made several attempts to share a song they had been working on. They wanted to sing it at the next big event, as it recounted the Ganga's religious and cultural significance in a way that they felt would resonate with listeners and motivate them to take a role in protecting the river. When they were halfway through their rendition, however, the men began to make calls on

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their cell phones. When the singing made their conversations hard to follow, the men raised their voices over the noise. They looked relieved when the song was finished and then went back to the "main business" of campaign organizing.

The women who sang the song stressed its significance, saying that it could be used to remind people that there are alternative forms of development (*vikas*) but that there are no other rivers on Earth with as much religious importance as the Ganga. The women felt in particular that the song might move more village women to action as it would evoke their sense of duty or *dharma* to defend the river. The men acknowledged this but preferred to focus on developing a strategy for framing dam opponents' demands to the media. At issue was a split in emphasis, with the women concerned with building a critical mass and the men concerned with convincing Indian publics outside of the mountains of the veracity of their claims and development critiques.

The dissonance demonstrated that the ways that mountain women tried to express themselves and contribute to the campaigns were not always valued. Such gender dynamics were typical of several other meetings that I observed. Over time, some women also began to complain in private to me that they doubted whether campaign participation was a valuable use of their time and energy. One woman in particular complained that she did not feel her comments to be sufficiently acknowledged, even though she believed she had good suggestions for getting more of the villagers involved by organizing Uttarkashi women to go on walking tours (*padyatra*) to raise awareness. Feeling undervalued in the movement organizing processes, she eventually withdrew to focus on family matters.

The need to get more rural residents involved was a sticking point with multiple ramifications. Many of the Uttarkashi-based women knew that it was important to have the solidarity of as many people living in the villages as possible. They felt that villagers had a livelihoods-centered viewpoint to share that could add more dimensions to the dam opposition claims. This call to broaden the movement's organizing was also an implicit critique of the split between rural, semi-urban, and urban power networks. The village women I spoke with, often during extended stays in homes where I trailed women's daily activities, echoed these sentiments. Many shared the concern for the Ganga's longevity and for the impact that lack of access to the water would have on their lives, but they criticized the movement for focusing on cultural and religious concerns when they were faced with survival challenges. Although many village women said that they did join the big events—the ones they felt would have the largest impact—they said that they opted out of more mundane organizing efforts due to lack of time, energy, and money as well as a general suspicion that the movement would be leveraged for the benefit of a few prominent male leaders (Figure 3). These criticisms are reminders that women's agency can be evidenced when they participate in movement events as well as when they knowingly abstain from participation.

Lack of attribution and the muting of mountain-based voices

Despite women's involvement in campaign organizing and their substantial participation in movement events—and in support of the skepticism that my rural interlocutors expressed—many press reports attributed the visibility of the dam opposition platform to the actions of a few leading men. This was less true of local media reports, which were more often than not in Hindi. Regional newspapers carried photos of women leading dam opposition campaigns and identified them by name. By contrast, the national papers, and especially the English print editions that reached urbanites in New Delhi and beyond, were more likely to attribute the momentum of dam opposition efforts to the actions and words of a handful of men.

A key figure who caught the limelight was G. D. Agarwal, a retired professor of engineering at the Indian Institute of Technology in Kanpur who took the vows of a Hindu swami in 2010. Agarwal's main tactic was to embark upon Gandhian fast-unto-death campaigns (*bhook hartal*). He began his first fast in the district capital of Uttarkashi in 2008 but later moved his protest to New Delhi. More fasts were launched from the Indian plains in 2009 and 2010, and each received increased media and policy-maker attention. The fast in 2010 ended after Indian government officials promised to cancel 3 contested dams and look into the possibility of creating an Ecologically Sensitive Zone in the region. Since 2010, Agarwal, now known as Swami Gyanswaroopanand, has undertaken additional fasts to push compliance with promises and to urge the National River Ganga Basin Authority to enact substantive policies to protect the Ganga's Himalayan flow.

Although Agarwal's approach was effective in stopping the dam construction, it was not necessarily well received in Garhwal. The main issue was that, similar to the policy-makers who once governed the region from Lucknow, he was considered an outsider (*biharwale*). His statements and his overall platform were also mainly based on a concern for the welfare of the Ganga and his desire to maintain an uninterrupted, free-flowing stretch that others could access for spiritual fulfillment and the maintenance of cultural and religious practices. Agarwal (2008) equated the "saving" of the Ganga from dams with the safeguarding of the Hindu faith. Several mountain residents shared these concerns, but they noted that his concerns were not necessarily centered on the well-being of the mountains and the people that live there. Some

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FIGURE 3 Man leading a rally during a "Save the Ganga" campaign. (Photo by Georgina Drew)

worried that the Ecologically Sensitive Zone he campaigned for would also lead to the creation of a conservation zone that would leave little room for mountain residents to demand and realize regionally appropriate development measures such as microdams on small tributaries and other projects that could be designed with a lighter ecological footprint while promoting regional employment.

Another contention was that the more coverage Agarwal received for his fasts, the less notice the national news seemed to take of those campaigning in the mountains. This frustrated many people in the movements, including some of the women that otherwise supported Agarwal's efforts. It was not just that mountain women wanted recognition for their hard work; they also wanted their particular concerns for the Ganga and for regional development to be heard. The women from the villages wanted people to know that their land was slipping into the ravines because of the blasting, their springs were drying, and they were worried about traveling on the unstable roads. They wondered how they would be compensated for lost resources. The women from the mountain urban centers such as Uttarkashi wanted people to know that the dams threatened to choke and degrade long stretches of an entity to which they turned for solace, companionship, and inspiration. They additionally wanted to remind people that the desire to see the upper reaches of the Ganga in an uninterrupted state is what drives many people from around the world to visit their area and to spend money on pilgrimage and tourist services. Although aspects of these concerns overlapped with those expressed by Agarwal, the mountain-based concerns centered on the attributes that they found valuable about the particular tributary that they lived near more than its importance to a pan-Indian "Hindu culture."

Mountain women and men alike reiterated that they were not against development per se. While those in the movements against large and mountain-altering dams on the Ganga did oppose the 3 contested projects, they also sought to engage debate about the kinds of development they wanted. Women noted that much of the development that had been implemented to date was destruction (*vinas*); they did, however, imagine

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alternate scenarios in which it could be otherwise. They dreamed of development projects such as nurseries with regionally appropriate plants and trees, better schools and hospitals, and more affordable solutions for village electrification than the national grid had to offer. When the attention shifted to a lone figure, in other words, even those who agreed with Agarwal in principle began to feel that his platform was not nearly as multidimensional as theirs. The risk was that the government would listen closely to one man's demands and that their concerns and desires would be secondary.

Addressing mountain women's concerns: Practice and policy implications

The case described here is not necessarily unique. It points to larger problems with the gendered dynamics of social mobilization in South Asia and elsewhere. At issue is not just how women in a series of antidam campaigns were incorporated or excluded from prominent roles in debates over mountain development. What lies beyond this is the challenge to integrate women's development concerns and desires in substantive ways that are more equitable and representative of the problems faced by mountain residents.

The onus for gender inclusion extends to social movement participants, media outlets, and policy-makers. While many mountain social movement participants did try to provide platforms for women to speak and be heard, more can be done to hold those in the limelight to the same standard. Media outlets can do a better job of drawing from the regional coverage, which is often more detailed, and by making an effort to understand more sides of the debates over sustainable development. Decision-makers must also make sure that policy discussions are not overrun by the discourses and demands of a few prominent figures who are the most visible in conflicts over environment and development.

To some, it may appear counterproductive to criticize movement processes. The work of social movements, after all, is to highlight an issue or a series of interconnected issues and to press for a substantive policy response. This often involves framing issues in ways that mobilize potential adherents and constituents while garnering bystander support and demobilizing the base of antagonists (Benford and Snow 2000: 614). In these efforts, movement leaders with charisma, name recognition, and social capital can succeed in drawing attention to movement claims. Yet, if our concern is for long-term effectiveness, true social inclusion, and representative democracy, then campaigns can and should strive to reflect the concerns and desires of a broad set of movement participants. At issue is the need to unravel the gendered structure of patriarchal institutions that are often resistant to change while highlighting women's roles as citizens with rights to be recognized and upheld (Krishna 2007: 33). This is important because inclusive movements are better situated to effectively advocate for marginalized groups and issues while positively influencing the policy process (Welden 2006).

These assertions echo points made by proponents of feminist political ecology, an approach that treats gender as a critical variable in shaping resource access and control while incorporating disparities of class, caste, race, and ethnicity into the analytical terrain (Rocheleau et al 1996: 4). Feminist political ecology as it was originally introduced includes 3 main themes. The first 2 of these are gendered knowledge and gendered environmental rights and responsibilities. These have received significant exploration in recent years in a number of gender-sensitive studies of water resource conflict (Ahmed 2005; Lahiri Dutt 2006). The third theme is gendered environmental politics and grassroots activism. This theme has received less attention, and there is a pressing need for its enhanced inquiry and study. The arguments presented in this article are a step toward pointing out the parameters of gendered environmental politics in a particular resource struggle in the Garhwal Himalaya. Many more studies are needed to explore some of the dimensions outlined in other mountain contexts.

It is important to acknowledge that exploring gendered environmental politics and grassroots activism includes analyses of the significant realms of meaning making and the enhanced senses of self that campaign participation can enable. As Rocheleau et al (1996: 5) note, the recent surge in women's involvement in collective struggles over natural resource and environmental issues is contributing to a "redefinition of their identities, the meaning of gender, and the nature of environmental problems." Although much work remains to be done to improve the scope of gender-inclusive dialogues, the very process of attempting to engage in resource debates is at times transformative for some women in ways that are promising. Over the course of my research, I witnessed a core group of women in the movements to oppose dams on the Ganga gain confidence in their demands and in their ability to articulate why and how the river's protection was important to them. Although these women did not receive national recognition for their efforts, they became prominent spokespeople for the cause regionally in the Garhwal mountains. Commenting on this, one of the most vocal women said to me that she felt emboldened to speak out more in the future to defend what she thought was right. Through the process of movement involvement, she reflected, "I understood that I have a voice, and now I will use it." As more women step forward

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to speak, the challenge ahead is for those in leadership positions to cede the proverbial floor and allow such women to take part in vital development and environment discussions so that the full gamut of the issues at stake can be understood before policy decisions are taken.

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