

Excerpts from an article

Empowering communities: integrating women's traditional health practices for sustainable health delivery systems in a globalizing environment

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The present article was presented at the November meeting and is also accepted for publication in the e-book on 'Global Sustainable Development: A Challenge for Consumer Citizens' by the IFHE Consumer Issues & FRM Programme Committee. Hence, only the excerpts from the article are given here and readers interested in the details can look at the e-book mentioned above.

This paper is based on a year of participatory research with a nongovernmental organization (NGO) called Central Himalayan Rural Action Group (CHIRAG) and documents the traditional health practices of women in the Kumaon hills in India, located at the foothills of the majestic Himalayas. The research also documents the dynamics of reaching far-flung areas through education and training. This is an account of the unheard voices of Kumaoni women with special reference to their reproductive and child health management practices. It is also an interesting blend of narration of "mother wisdom" woven into lived experiences.

The study was conducted in six villages in the Kumaon hills with a group of 60 women between the ages of 18 and 45 years. Of the six villages included in the study, two received no health inputs while the other four benefited from the CHIRAG assisted outreach programs. Poverty, lack of access to potable water, schools, and hospitals, and the bleak living conditions in the mountains subject women to a constant cycle of drudgery and deprivation. Added to these are the burdens related to early marriage, multiple and unsafe pregnancies, and high infant mortality rates. Against this background, the study develops an innovative way of looking at health as an integral part of environment, culture, social knowledge, and practices that constitute the totality of health and development.

Studies such as this provide the space for rethinking health education and promotional health care strategy that respects culture and traditions and focuses on women's health while promoting self-reliance. My approach towards advocating for the integration of holistic health practices involves not merely documenting the practices, but also pointing out those which are beneficial to women, harmonious with nature and the life cycle, and others that are unscientific and obsolete.