

## Editorial

### Cultural heritage lifting rural mountain women out of poverty

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Mountain people are [among the world's poorest](#). Living in fragile ecosystems threatened by climate change and land degradation, one in every two rural mountain people in developing countries risks not having enough food for a healthy life.

On the occasion of International Women's Day, it is important that we recall how these vulnerabilities have a particularly serious impact on the living conditions of women, as they reduce their economic and social opportunities. And it is equally important to underline what we can do to change the current state of affairs, by committing to work together for the promotion of women's empowerment.

Mountain women – who mostly bear the main responsibility for the wellbeing of their families – often face higher rates of poverty and malnutrition as social norms and practices limit their access to services, resources and markets. Yet, these women, and mountain communities in general, are also guardians of traditional knowledge and skills developed and passed down over centuries.

Crafts are a critical and essential element for the rural economy, where rural women play a key role given their rich practice in handmade products and artisanship.

And there are innovative ways to harness this expertise to improve rural mountain livelihoods and incomes and turn lives around.

In Barskoon, a settlement lying at 1750 meters elevation in north-eastern Kyrgyzstan, women have for generations created carpets, wall hangings and silk scarves adorned with traditional feltwork.

Women use their valuable skills, know-how and locally available materials, to create products that respect nature, generate income and, unlike labour migration, this activity does not disturb the social harmony of rural communities.

Kyrgyz felt products, which have both a highly practical value and a dense figurative language, are richly decorated with patterns reflecting the local environment, plants and animals, as well as cosmological and religious motifs.

In 2017, the women in Barskoon formed an artisan group called Topchu to produce and market products collectively based on the traditional skills passed on from their mothers and

grandmothers, and partnered with the Mountain Partnership Products initiative to sell and market silk and felt scarves.

Established by the Mountain Partnership Secretariat of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, the Mountain Partnership Products initiative is a global branding scheme promoting products such as organic food and textiles made by small-scale producers in mountain areas that preserve traditional techniques.

With support from the Italian Development Cooperation, the initiative has already assisted more than 10,000 mountain people - 6,000 of them women - in eight countries, with a rise in production and sales of up to 40 percent.

Thanks to the sales of their products around the world, the women of Barskoon have been able to double their incomes and can afford to pay for their children's needs, expand their vegetable gardens and buy livestock.

Now a new collaboration with the Italian-Haitian fashion designer Stella Jean is providing an even greater boost to their business.

Stella Jean, a champion of ethical fashion, learned of the women's work through FAO's Women's Committee, and was introduced to the Mountain Partnership Products initiative to work on a sustainable fashion collection featuring the women's designs in feltwork and embroidery.

Despite challenges related to COVID-19 pandemic, including a prolonged lockdown period, Jean joined forces with a local Kyrgyz designer and held virtual brainstorming sessions to design samples, which the women in Barskoon then produced.

While the Kyrgyz women brought their distinctive craft and skills to the table, Jean brought 'Made in Italy' expertise, knowledge of contemporary fashion and access to the global marketplace.

Last month, the story of this innovative collaboration and the resulting capsule collection was showcased at Milan Fashion Week.

Crucially, the women of Topchu retain ownership of the designs so they can reproduce and sell the fashion items directly, benefiting from Jean's international exposure and connections with global markets.

This successful collaboration is a powerful example of how cultural heritage can be a driver of sustainable development, and how a forward-looking private company can contribute to

promote technical competence, share know-how and enhance livelihoods. And it can be replicated in other countries to support women textile producers of the Mountain Partnership Products initiative.

It also highlights how women's empowerment and global-local interlinkages can create economic opportunities, establishing a solid foundation that can propel positive change in the social and economic position women hold in their communities.

Relevant steps towards women's empowerment means giving women access to a regular income, valuing their traditional knowledge, autonomous decision-making over the use of resources, and boosting self-esteem.

As we celebrate International Women's Day today, we also celebrate the richness of mountain women's traditional techniques and expertise. Let us work as a global community to create an enabling environment where all women can use the extraordinary gifts of their cultural heritage to create a better future for themselves and their families.

Related links:

[Mountain Partnership](#)

[Mountain Partnership Products initiative](#)

[Stella Jean](#)

[Italian Development Cooperation](#)