

Socio -Economic Empowerment of Women through Self Help Groups in Uttarakhand: A Case Study

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ABSTRACT

In mountain regions like Uttarakhand for socio economic empowerment and sustainability women's play a vital role through self help groups. Women's SHGs emerged as role model of sustainable rural livelihoods and socio-economic empowerment through agricultural diversification and transformation. In the mountain regions gender based policies has the urgent need for ensuring participation of women in policy making, community based interventions and institutional support.

Key Words : Empowerment, Diversification, Self Help Groups, Transformation

INTRODUCTION

The Uttarakhand state administratively organized in the year 2000 A.D. As per the census 2011 about 10.1 million people lives in 15024 inhabited villages with 84 urban centers, spread over 53483.59 sq. km. The share of rural population in the total population of the state is around 74.33 per cent. Agriculture is the mainstay of the people it provides two third of the population. Basically the state is predominantly rural and subsistence agrarian economy, with limited livelihood options. State monopolizes most of the land resources and only about 33 percent land is in individual ownership. As result of mountain topography and climate- and apprehension of ecological degradation associated with every endeavor to expand arable land, and more importantly very low public investment and almost no innovation, agriculture in the region is carried out with the age old technology. Hence agriculture is highly incapable to provide income and employment round the year to the dependent population and consequently large numbers of young male migrate in search of livelihood. This is apparently reflected in sex ratio, in which female out number male in many districts

of the state and very high participation rate of women in work force. As a mater of fact female cultivators are more in absolute and relative terms *vis-à-vis* men. However, women traditionally have no ownership of land resources hence they are more owner of production process than entrepreneurs. Their activities revolve around subsistence farming to produce for domestic consumption, for which they have to work generally for 16- 18 hour per day. This arduous tradition of work, has inculcated the habit of rationally using, promoting and conserving the traditional crop biodiversity. Indeed women have internalized the fact that conservation of environment is a prerequisite of food security. From centuries they have learnt the art to maintain their families practically without any cash income and very feeble links and exposure to the outside world. However, market linkages, spread of literacy has ushered changes and women have shown that they are ready to face the challenges and could utilize the opportunities thrown open by globalizing market economy.

METHODOLOGY

To examine the socio- economic empowerment of

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women in uttarakhand a sample of women Self help Group (SHG) working in twelve villages located in Nagaun block of Uttarkashi district of Uttarakhand State have been selected for the study. In the selection of villages, altitudinal location, distance from block headquarters, market/growth centers, vehicular road and also cultural diversities like caste composition of the village were given due representation, to make the sample typical representative of rural areas of the mountains (Table 1).

Table 1 : Attributes of sample

| Attributes | Number |
|---|---------------|
| Sample Villages | 12 |
| Sample SHG/ women Enterprises | 20 |
| Total Women participated in PRA and FGD | 200 |
| Altitudinal Range of sample villages | 1500-2000 msl |
| Proximity of villages from nearest road | 0.0 to 5 km |
| Proximity of villages from nearest Market | 0.0 to 20km |
| Location of villages from nearby forest | 0.5 to km |
| Nature of composition of villages | Multi caste |
| Total households in sample villages | 821 |
| Total population of sample villages | 4943 |
| Sex ratio of sample villages | 960 |
| Female literacy of sample villages | 63.21 |
| Average size of household | 6 persons |
| Land holding / per household | 0.90 hectare |
| Percentage of irrigated land to total cultivable land | 17.5 per cent |
| Percentage of land under organic traditional crops | 63.95 |

Source: Collected through Survey conducted in 2017-18

The study is based on the experiences of Rawain Women Co-operative Federation (RWCF) - a joint venture of self help groups of women of Yamuna valley. Data of income, employment and empowerment related issues were collected through interviewing the member of different Self Help Group (SHGs) /women enterprises, using open-ended interviews and guided dialogue techniques. As many as 20 SHGs and 200 women respondents participated in the study by sharing their perceptions and providing necessary information to prepare the data base for the study. Focus group discussion (FGD) and participatory rural appraisal (PRA) of women was also carried out to ascertain the community perception on various issues related to grass-root empowerment and agro enterprise management of the region.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As mentioned earlier women in the region are the pivot of economy and society, bearing major responsibilities for agriculture, forest and other natural resource management, so is the situation in the sample villages. Women, constitute a little less than fifty per cent about 49.1 per cent of the total population of the sample villages except to plough field, forbidden for women in a man dominated society, and is a symbol of male superiority, all other activities in agriculture are primarily responsibility of women. In the sample villages women's contribution in various activities in terms of hours of work is overwhelming. A perusal of the following table reveals that except in animal husbandry in which tendering of cattle is an important activity, in all other activities women are contributing more than 85 per cent (Table 2). Here it is to be mentioned, besides cultural reasons, the absence of young male, as they migrate for earning livelihood leaving their families at villages, has also increased the drudgeries of women (NIAR, 2004).

Table 2 : Women's contribution to various activities in Uttarakhand

| Activity | Women's contribution (%) |
|----------------------|--------------------------|
| Agriculture | 85.70 |
| Cattle care | 83.50 |
| Fuel-wood collection | 90.60 |
| Fodder collection | 94.70 |
| Water collection | 90.80 |
| Cooking | 96.90 |
| Child care | 95.00 |

Source: Collected through Survey conducted in 2017-18

The findings of this study shows that many farming activities like preparation of field, earthing, sowing seed, maring of fields, irrigation and guarding the crops are done independently by women (Samal, 2006). Despite these drudgeries, one can argue that the women are more insightful in issues related to sustainable development- specially managing and conserving the resource base and mobilizing masses for this purpose.

As mentioned earlier that the region is one important part of ten biodiversity mega-center of the world. The region is endowed with rich, globally important gene pools, species and ecosystems (Samal, 2006). This Agro-bio-diversity forms an integral and important component of livelihood base of the region and it is deep rooted in the traditions. The traditional crop diversity of the region

is very high and about forty different crop species comprising cereals, pseudo cereals, millets, pulses, oilseeds etc. and number of sub varieties are cultivated and conserved by women (Semwal *et al.*, 2001). The support this biodiversity provides in ensuring food security is apparent from the fact that cultivators (especially women) of the region traditionally harvest more than twelve grains and pluses in the monsoon crops and seven to eight crops are raised simultaneously in one field. Their knowledge of rain-fed agriculture with associated practices like mixed cropping, maintenance of soil fertility etc. is ecologically practicable and economically viable. This bio-diversity provides a sort of protection against total crop failure and now opening new vistas of development.

Women of the region have a long experience of enterprise-based agriculture and a definite pattern of enterprise agriculture was operating in the region thought the mechanism of barter system. The traditional food-grains like Amaranth, Buckwheat, Pig-weed, Hog-millet, Pigeon pea, Horse gram and naked barley etc were generally exchanged for salt. In this system the term of trade had very adverse term of trade. The region, after attaining a separate Statehood of Indian Republic in 2000, as Uttarakhand state was declared as an organic state and state patronage is being extended to it. This has provided momentum and traditional cooperative groups of women have understood the benefits of collective action and management of indigenous knowledge system. During study of women Cooperative Federation (WCF) /SHGs activities, it was found that the women of different SHGs were willing to take up entrepreneurship but initially were not confident of their ability to do so. The NGO working in this area, Himalayan Action Research Centre (HARC) has played an important role by providing institutional support through different programmes like creation of Self Help Groups (SHGs)/ micro enterprises

of women farmers at village level, formation of women farmers cooperative federation- (the Rawain Women Cooperative Federation (RWCF)), at the regional level, organizing training programme to SHGs and federation members and visit for interaction, to other mountain state and different national level markets. The Rawain Women Cooperative Federation took up the challenge to develop collective entrepreneurship among women, and developed a network in the areas. The details of this network and activities carried out are in the Table 3.

After series of multifaceted trainings and orientation programmes women of the federation have started income generation activities (IGA) by utilizing their monthly savings. This federation organizes village level workshops every three months for women groups to enhance their skills in production, planning, and management. A production plan is formulated on the basis of the market demand. To achieve the target of the production plan an agreement is signed with the various women groups and cooperatives. This systematic production planning helps strengthen backward linkages and ensure a continuous supply of products in the market. The details of major activities of agro-enterprises and Women Cooperative Federation are listed blow:

Success of any micro enterprise depends on the selection of the right income generation activity based on local resources. Women of the federation conduct village level exercises with SHGs for identifying and analyzing the local resources for income generation activities. The selection of the activity is done on the basis of availability of the resources, its quantity, quality and its market demand.

Some food crops that are staple diets of poor in the region are gradually disappearing for instance area under Buckwheat, Horse gram, and Foxtail millet decreased by 80 per cent to 100 per cent in the eighties to nineties of the last century mainly because of wheat and rice

Table 3 : Particulars of Women Cooperative Federation and SHGs

| Particulars | Number |
|---|-------------|
| Number of villages associated with women federation | 32 |
| Number of SHGs associated with women federation | 219 |
| Number of women farmers employed in SHGs | 2838 |
| Number of women benefited by capacity building training | 2219 |
| Number of villages got demonstration of organic farming | 19 |
| Number of Grading and Packing Exposure of traditional crops | 18 |
| Crop under organic certification | Kidney Bean |

Source: Collected through Survey conducted in 2017-18

imported from place are available at cheap rates in the public distribution system and the short fall of food were being supplemented by local production. Other reason for the decline of area under these crops, besides lack of demand was also stagnation in prices expressed, not in monetary value but exchange rates with other grains (Banskot, 2004). However, these food crops have very high nutritive value and along with other organic produced cereals, pulses and vegetables have potential demand. Very recently Japan's multinational company *Yoshifoomi Kihata* producing baby food has purchased fox millet (*Mandua*) in bulk from the region, mainly because the crop is produced by and large by organic methods.

Realizing this market importance of the organic product, with the help and motivation of HARC and women federation, farmers of the region now are cultivating many traditional crops at commercial scale. The average productivity of these crops ranges from 15 quintals per hectare to 20 quintals per hectare. But as mentioned earlier lack of marketing network, the farmers were do not get good return. The exchange rates of various traditional products of the region with those not produced in the region indicate very unfavorable term of trade. Realizing the problems, the Women Federation made efforts since beginning to develop market linkages between the federation and the private and government organizations, designing marketing strategies, developing rural marketing information system and building credit linkages.

SHGs organized village level workshops for women groups to enhance their skills in production planning and management. A production plan was formulated on the basis of the market demand. To achieve the target of the

production plan an agreement was signed with the various Women groups (Naugoan, Mirada, Sunara, Bagasu, Palctha and Kotiyal villages) and women cooperatives. This systematic production planning helped strengthen backward linkages and ensured a continuous supply of products in the market.

The women groups involved in income generation activities formed cooperative and started marketing their products like spices, pulses, millets and processed item through it. HARC provided advanced trainings to SHG members of cooperative on grading, packing, quality control, processing, and development of production plan, financial management, and marketing and negotiation skills to 195 producer members of Gawain Women Cooperative Society.

HARC encouraged the farmers to adopt the crop cycle plan, which has helped the farmer association to assess the time of production and the availability of the products. Farmer interest groups and their associations were also imparted training and orientation on production planning and collective marketing. Exposure tours were also conducted for the farmers on quality control. These interventions helped in improving the quality of the products. The women groups are involved in different income generation activities through local agro based resources HARC provides advanced trainings to SHGs on grading, packing, quality control, processing, development of production plan, financial management, and marketing and negotiation skill. SHGs master trainers similarly provide capacity building related exercise to farmer interest groups at the village level.

With the help of HARC, the Women Federation and SHGs formulate a marketing strategy for appropriate

Table 4 : Marketing of major traditional crops by women federation

| English name | Vernacular name | English name | Vernacular name |
|---------------|-----------------|--------------|----------------------------|
| Amaranth | Chaulai | Taro | Pindalu/Kuchain |
| Pig-weed | Bethu | Red gram | Tor |
| Hog-millet | Cheena | Soybean | Bhatt/ Kala Bhatt/ Soybean |
| Buckwheat | Oggal | Kidney Bean | Rajama |
| Finger millet | Kodo/Manduwa | Black gram | Urd |
| Buckwheat | Phaphar | Mat bean | Bhirnga |
| Maize | Mungri | Adzuki bean | Rayans |
| Rice bean | Bhotia | Horse gram | Gahat |
| Zinger | Adrak | Potato | Alu |
| Red Rice | Dhan/ satti | Cow pea | Sonta |
| Sorghum | Jhnagora, | Sesame | Til |
| Chili | Lal Mirch | | Jakhiya |

Source: Collected through Survey conducted in 2017-18

market channels and proper product supply. The strategy is also formulated to increase the accessibility of market and to understand the dynamics and trend of the market and bargaining skill. To create awareness about a product among the consumers, pamphlets, folders, leaflets etc. are being distributed in local market and 8 outlets have been set up on the pilgrimage route to Badrinath, Yamunotri and Gangotri during the peak tourist season. To explore the good market channels for the products of farmer association and cooperative, market surveys were done in 14 mandies(market centres) of New Delhi (Amateur, and Okla.), Katipo, Chandigarh, Meerut, Muzaffarnagar, Dehradun, Saharanpur, Lucknow, Kanpur, Sarahan (HP), Bangalore etc. These market surveys helped in identifying good wholesalers for local product. The farmer associations have signed an agreement with the traders that protect farmers from market fluctuations.

At present products of women federation are being marketed in 16 cities including Dehradun, Rishikesh, Stringer, Gopeshwar, Mussorie, Haridwar, Roorkee, Delhi, Karnal in Haryana, Ahmedabad, Hyderabad, Badaun etc. For the promotion of the new products, a product launching program is organized time to time. Mother Dairy, New Delhi purchases vegetables and traditional crops at market prices on weekly payment and sends account payee cheques to women through their federation. HARC and the Federation also facilitated the participation of women farmers in state and national level fairs and exhibition such as Uttaranchal Mahotsav at Dilli Hatt and Ashoka Hotel, Agriculture Expo, International Trade fair in Pragati Maidan in New Delhi, National Women Farmers Fair and Exhibition in Ahmedabad, Virasat Fair and Saras fair in Dehradun to promote and display the products.

The Women Federation is collecting information of the daily sale prices at different mandies of the country through different websites and providing this to farmer SHGs. This enables the farmers to know the daily prices of their produce. Through a network created by HARC, information on daily prices is taken from 5 mandies, which also includes Azadpur and Okhla mandi in Delhi and Kashipur mandies. The daily prices help the farmers to choose and decide the mandi to sell their produce. Everyday prices are displayed at the Women Federation office so that the farmers do not get exploited.

Conclusion and Policy Implication:

The above discussion indicates that the economic

empowerment of grass-roots women in the management of agro-enterprises has tapped the potential marginally. The diversification of agriculture in the region along these lines is the urgent need for ensuring participation of women in policy making, community based interventions, regional /multi-local networking of SHGs and institutional support. Recently environmental sustainability, food security and bio diversity related issues have become important in the context of sustainable mountain development. If the entire state's bio-farming patterns work along with the lines of RWCF of Yamuna Valley, the expectation of marginal mountains farmers will be fulfilled, keeping in view the high premium being put on organic food, especially the Himalayan one. This will prove more sustainable livelihood opportunities standing friendly to environment. This experience also women have been capable to visualize the opportunities that globalization has to offer and are working to turn utilize them. This will usher radical change, as women have started carrying out tasks that were exclusive male's domain - like taking investment marketing and decisions. This process is increasing household incomes and the participation of women in social and political activities as well. This could enable them to absorb the transition smoothly from an traditional agriculture to market linked, with its unique selling property of Bio product. If the process of bio-production is conserved and replicated in other parts of the state, it has the potentials to make the process of globalization at least in this state, inclusive and participatory. However the much desired state initiatives in this regard to create positive externalities of various types which will lessen the burden of work of women and the institutional reforms in land ownerships like consolidation of holdings is yet to be debated and experimented seriously.

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