

ACHIEVING WOMEN EMPOWERMENT THROUGH SELF-HELP GROUPS AND MICROFINANCE: A CASE STUDY OF HIMACHAL PRADESH

Lalit Sharma and Vijay Kumar Sharma

Project Officers, Institute of Integrated Himalayan Studies, Himachal Pradesh University, Shimla

ABSTRACT

Empowerment of women, also known as gender empowerment, has emerged as an important topic of debate in context of development and economics. The Constitution not only grants equal opportunity to women but also authorize the state to adopt measures in favour of women. In the recent years, the Self-Help Group movement gained a motivation and rising avenues together with enough training helped thousands of women to share the benefit. This paper explores the role of Self Help Groups in empowering women in Himachal Pradesh.

INTRODUCTION

The concept of empowerment has always been a subject of intellectual dialogue and deliberations across the world. Gobezie, defined empowerment as:

“...a process by which women takes control and ownership of their lives through expression of their choice...”

It is the process of acquiring the ability to make strategic life choice in a context where this ability has previously been denied. Two vital processes have been identified as important for empowerment, the first being the social mobilization, as the poor women often lack basic capabilities and self-confidence to encounter challenges and barriers. Second is the process of social mobilization, accompanied by economic security. According to Blanchard, *et al*:

“...Empowerment is not equipping people with power; people already have plenty of power in the wealth of their knowledge and motivation, to perform their duties magnificently. Thus empowerment is something different. It is letting this inherent power out...”

Rapport (1987) describes the term empowerment as a process and mechanism by which people, organizations and communities gain mastery over their affairs. Staples (1990) defined empowerment as means (a) to gain power (b) to develop power; to take or seize power; (c) to facilitate or enable power and (d) to give or grant or permit power. Sudharani *et al*. (2000) defined empowerment as the process of challenging existing power relations and gaining greater control over the sources of power. Empowerment is thus, a process of obtaining basic opportunities and includes stirring of skills for, self-reliance. Kabeer defined empowerment as agency, awareness of gendered power structures, self-esteem and self-confidence. Mayoux's (2000) definition of women empowerment relates more directly with power, as “a multidimensional and interlinked process of change in power relations”. It consists of:

‘Power within’, enabling women to express their own ambition and strategies for change;

‘Power to’, letting women to develop the necessary skills and access the essential resources to attain their goals;

'*Power with*', enabling women to scrutinize and articulate their joint interests, to organize, to achieve them and to link with other women and men's organizations for change; and

'*Power over*' changing the fundamental inequalities in power and resources that restrain women's aspirations and their talent to achieve them.

These power relations operate in different spheres of life and at different levels. Women empowerment is a new phrase in the terminology of gender literature and is used in two broad contexts i.e. general and specific. In general sense, it connotes empowerment of women to be self-dependent by offering them access to all independence and chances, which they were deprived of in the past only because of being women. In a specific sense, women empowerment indicates the efforts made to enhance the position of women in society. Women empowerment means that the women have a command or capability to control their day-to-day lives in the socioeconomic and political terms -a power which allows them to move from the marginalize state to a higher state. The code of gender equality is protected in Indian Constitution in its preamble, fundamental rights, fundamental duties and directive principles. Within the structure of democratic polity, our laws, developmental strategies, plans and programmes are aimed at women's development in different fields. In spite of significant changes in the status of women in India after independence, there is still a great deviation from constitutional position and stark reality of dreadful conditions.

With the help of Central government, State has implemented various programmes and schemes for the upliftment, advantage & empowerment of women. Some of these are- self-employment programme for women, marriage grant to destitute girls, setting up of working women hostels and state homes for destitute and deserted women, pension scheme for widows, child welfare schemes by opening orphanages for girls, Integrated Child Development Services Scheme (ICDS), supplementary nutrition programme under Integrated Child Development Services Scheme, etc. (Vaidya, 2004).

The concept of Self-Help Groups (SHG) emerged in seventies in Bangladesh and in India, since early nineties. The idea behind encouraging SHGs was to give credit to the poor, which can help in poverty reduction. These groups usually have women members between five to twenty and even more, who gather, elect their leader on democratic principles, save money and lend the money within a group. They even take loans from other financial institutions like banks. The Women and Child Development Department of the Ministry of HRD, Government of India, is executing women's empowerment programme in a big way. Since 1999, the department approved the policy of social mobilization by forming small Self Help Groups of women, which can help and encourage women to practice savings and root out small loans to women who are in need. From making pickles to candles, traditional jewellery to handicrafts to running of canteens, women belonging to Self-Help Groups (SHG) in India are racing ahead in terms of self-employability. In the recent years, the women SHG movement gained an impetus and rising avenues coupled with enough training helped thousands of women to share the benefit. With facilitation from banks and non-governmental organizations, women have been trained in toy making, vermi-composting, incense sticks making, handicrafts, candle-making, tailoring, and pickle preparation. Rural women, from times of yore,

have been significant to propagation of food crops, preservation of seeds, use of wild edibles through value addition, livestock rearing, etc., which they achieve by using their traditional wisdom. Not only are they curators of bio-resources, they are equally endowed with indigenous wisdom of traditional medicine, management of land resources, family health care, innovations with respect to eatables and handicrafts, etc. This paper explores the role of Self Help Groups in empowering women.

SELF-HELP GROUPS: SHARING THE BENEFITS OF MICROFINANCE

The most primitive SHGs in Himachal Pradesh were formed during the British period in Una district to solve the perennial water problem in *Kandi* areas. These groups were called *Choe* Reclamation (CR) groups. They worked quite well until 1947 when the Irrigation Department took control over water resource management. The group members utilized their indigenous wisdom to protect watershed in *Kandi* area to eliminate the problems of water scarcity. The Self Help Group (SHG) movement has extended across the state and is now moving ahead with firm footing. The movement gained impetus with support in the human resource development. There were 59,185 SHGs as on 30th September, 2011 operative in the state promoted by Department of Social Justice and Empowerment and various NGOs, farmers clubs and banks.

A number of schemes have been initiated for the betterment of women. The promotion of dairy units in the state has got the response of people which speaks volumes about this ambitious scheme being executed by the State Government through National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD) and Self Help Groups. Under the project, Self Help Groups are being provided loans for setting up dairy units of ten animals. For the procurement of the fodder, weaker sections like Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes are being provided 50 percent subsidy on the fodder seeds. NABARD in association with Animal Husbandry Department, Milk-fed, etc. is regularly holding awareness camps for the farmers and women Self Help Groups at block-level to propagate various schemes. With a focus on economic empowerment for helping women to attain financial freedom, government schemes have been able to form thousands of self-help groups in the state. These groups involved in a variety of income generating activities have done an admirable job by successfully adding to the state's economy.

Chinmaya Organization for Rural Development (CORD) a non-governmental organization operating in the state of Himachal believes that "*if the women have money in their hands*" it "*leads to better and dignified lives*". It is promoting self-reliance among women by supporting Self-Help Groups where women can generate their own funds. It has formed and strengthened more than 1,470 Self Help Groups in villages of District *Kangra* involving more than 22,000 women from poor and marginalized communities.

There are numerous examples where women have shared the benefits of the resources they are linked with, which have not only made them self-dependent but also true beneficiaries. This has been possible through the Self-Help Groups and other social organizations to which the rural women are linked. A few examples are narrated below to illustrate the benefits which the women are reaping through these groups:

Ecosphere, together with MUSE (Creative Initiatives for Sustainable development), STAG (Spiti Trans-Himalayan Action Group) and SSS (Spiti Seabuckthorn Society) are working on the preservation of natural resources in cold desert areas of Himachal. MUSE was established with an objective to respond to the need for alternate livelihood in tribal district of *Spiti*. MUSE team is focusing on developing options that can tap local surpluses and unique attributes. One such surplus identified by the group is Seabuckthorn. By creating a market for barley and black peas, the group is making attempts to encourage the cultivation of local crops, besides conserving the organic practices. Seabuckthorn, a plant that grows wild in the *Spiti* region, is increasingly being regarded as the most exciting plant in the botanical kingdom. The group undertakes commercialisation & conservation, awareness generation and community mobilisation, organization & empowerment of women through this plant. Initially the group selected five resource rich villages and formed women producer groups. The women, who were initially identified as the target beneficiaries, are the torch bearers of this programme, who after training have not only started protecting the existing Seabuckthorn resources by not allowing its extraction, but have also initiated its propagation along the river beds. Each producer groups comprise of one member from each family in the village, who harvests the predetermined quantity. This not only ensures equitable benefits flowing to each and every family in the village, but also makes the distribution of earnings within the groups simpler. Promotion of indigenous knowledge and usage of these resources either as health supplements or for the treatment of common ailments is being promoted through the local doctors who have been mobilized to generate awareness amongst the community with regards to their age old system as well as the vital role played by various natural resources in the sustenance of this system.

Taking a cue from the women oriented programmes being run by the state government, women of Chhamla panchayat in Arki Sub Division of Solan District formed six SHGs, Ganesh, Jalpa, Ruchi, Meenakshi, Parvati and Om Shanti Om through local Aanganwadicentres. To begin with, *Om Shanti Om* was formed by twelve women of the area by contributing Rs. 100 each with the objective of creating self-employment opportunities and also generating income. They started preparing pickles, jellies, teddy bears; kroschia woven sweaters, bags and later on they started cultivating Mushroom. Self Help Group formed in Chhamla Panchayat of Arki Sub Division of Solan District is a unique example of women empowerment. With their sheer determination and hard work every member of this group today has substantial balance in their accounts. The Self-help Group is also providing loans to members on easy rate of interest. Each member of the group is now earning up to Rs.4000. They also sell their products in exhibitions during various fairs and festivals. Thus Om Shanti Om Self Help Group has provided an alternative way of earning on the one hand and has also added to self-respect of women on the other. Mushroom is sold in the nearby market and mushroom pickle is also prepared. SHG has also started rearing animals and are selling milk in the nearby markets and each member is fetching handsome income additionally from this. More than 2300 Self Help Groups have been formed in district Solan under the Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS). Similarly, more than 700 SHGs have also been formed in the district under District Rural Development Agency (DRDA). The success story of hard working women of Chhamla Panchayat is not confined to

Chhamla Panchayat only but has shown light to women communities across the state.

Swaraj in village Banjar, District Kullu executed a project on Environment conservation through Mahila Mandals and SHGs. The project was funded by Indo-Norwegian Project financing agency through the Department of Rural Development, Government of Himachal Pradesh. The main thrust of the project was to involve the SHGs under Swaraj in "livelihood options through environmental conservation." The main activities included recycling of wastes, vermin-culture composting and production of organic manure, organic farming, forestry, clean village campaigns, etc. Secondly, under the income generation programme local handicraft was promoted by adopting new, more efficient techniques. Thus, the women besides sharing experiences on the issues associated with resource conservation, gained technical know-how of contemporary scientific world which they can blend with the conventional knowledge for achieving success.

A village women venture Self-Help Recycling, Altering and Manufacturing group (SHRAM) has set a best model of bringing out the rural women from their houses to recycle local industrial waste in *Sirmour* district. A Brazilian biologist-cum-environmental educator has educated the members of this group about the utility of the plastic bottles to make furniture, brooms and decoration products. Farming systems of state are mixed and subsistence in nature and almost every household in rural area are involved in agriculture, horticulture and animal husbandry activities. During lean periods, rural women devote their time in preparing pickles and nuggets at household level because of surplus wild edibles, fruits, vegetables, milk, pulses and cereals. To make such women as rural entrepreneurs, Krishi Vigyan Kendra, Hamirpur in collaboration with Department of Agriculture and Horticulture organized number of vocational training courses wherein women of different Self Help Groups (SHGs) were trained for preparation of various value added products. Women were trained in mushroom cultivation, preparation of pickle, nuggets, vermicelli, seera, chutneys, mango powder, *triphala* powder and *amla* candy. The groups engaged in such activities procure raw material at cheaper rates and use it during their free time.

The industrial unit of Bhaira Jams, a brand known all over the country for its organic preserves was started by Linnet Mushran in 1992 in a village near Rajgarh in district *Sirmour*. This entire-woman affair has not only set a new standard of taste in preservative-free jams and marmalades, but has emancipated women in the thinly populated sub-division of *Sirmaur* district in Himachal Pradesh. It is a case of opportunity coming at the doorstep of rural women who had no other job avenues. The unit has not only empowered women who can easily set up units of their own but also small fruit growers who don't have to depend on middleman for selling their fruits. Earlier, these women didn't have a penny to their names, but now they have separate bank accounts.

Sushri Khormosu, a Self Help Group of Spillo, district Kinnaur, is running apricot oil extraction unit, where the process of oil extraction was standardized by Solan, comprising of decertification of apricot fruit stone, separation of kernels, followed by recovery of oil by making use of expellers and filter press. There are numerous groups engaged in livestock management and allied activities. *Ganapati* Self Help

Group in District Solan is focusing on farming and cattle rearing, including production of milk and milk products. In the last few years this SHG has made expansion in traditional livelihood and occupational diversification. Self Help Groups are giving indigenous mountain communities control over their natural resources, besides, preserving bio-cultural diversity. 'Gaddi women's Self Help Society' in the small mountain villages of Kangra, is running its tailoring school where underprivileged women are trained in skill of cutting, stitching, hand embroidery and hand stitching. *Laxmi* and *Prem* Self-help groups of district Kullu are preserving culture and traditions of weaving and knitting. *Killar*, *Karyuni*, *Huddan*, *Tundru*, *Sural*, *ChamiChholing* and many other self-help groups in district Chamba are involved in traditional carpet weaving. Thus, women are truly the sustainable users and custodians of biological diversity and if trained appropriately, they can really reap the benefits of the resources, they are linked with.

CASE STUDY OF MANDI AND KULLU DISTRICTS

In order to analyse the status of women, to find out the extent of awareness among women and to study the impact of various policies and programmes in changing the role of women, data was collected from selected pockets of district Mandi and Kullu. The data was gathered from selected pockets of Kullu Block of District Kullu and Dharampur Block of District Mandi. A many as sixty *Mahila Mandals* and thirty four Self Help Groups were analysed for the purpose.

In recent years, the traditional roles of women have undergone transition due to changing economic needs, and besides agriculture, women are engaged in other jobs there by making contribution to the overall growth and development of society. From the earliest days of agriculture, women have played a key role in cultivation and livestock rearing. Yet women's efforts and achievements have been little recognized or rewarded.

Women Self Help Groups (SHG's) have come a long way from their period of inception. These groups are working well for women, not only in meeting emergency cash needs, but also in women's empowerment especially of poor women. The SHG's willingly formed by women save whatever amount they can manage to save every month and jointly agree to donate to a common fund to be given to some members for meeting their needs. Besides focusing on entrepreneurial development of the beneficiaries, these SHG's undertake the responsibility of delivering non-credit services such as literacy, health and environmental issues. The members of groups visited and interviewed, meet once or twice a month and maintain their records. They prepare their own action plans after a detailed discussion. The study focused on the effect of the SHG strategy on women's economic activities and occupational change, analysed the intervention of SHG strategy in asset creation, and also the level of participation of women in decision-making process.

From Dharampur Block of district Mandi seven Self-Help Groups were analysed. The number of members in these groups varies from 9-20. All of these groups were constituted between the years 2001-2010. Six groups were associated with Punjab National Bank and one to Himachal Pradesh Gramin Bank Ltd. Self Help groups like, *Mashaal*, *Radha Swoami* and *Braham Chhatti* of district Mandi are preparing pickles, squashes, jams and murabaas by making use of locally available fruits and

wild edibles. SwaranJayantiSelf-help Group of Mandi District is also involved in cattle rearing and milk sale. Shadhadi, Suraj pal, Joida Narayan, Nahar Singh, Gautam and many more self-help groups of districtKullu are dealing with livestock rearing and reaping the benefits of cattle rearing. The amount of loan provided as financial assistance to these groups varies from 50 thousand to three Lakh. Four groups were involved in pickle preparation and one in selling milk. Eleven SHG's were visited in Kullu Block of District Kullu. Number of members in these groups varies were seven to ten. All these groups started in 1999. Two groups were financed by Punjab National Bank, five by Himachal Pradesh Gramin Bank Ltd., three by State Bank of India and one by UCO Bank. Six groups were involved in livestock rearing and one group was involved in knitting, and one in weaving. All these groups were active and were trained by DRDA and BDO's.

STORY OF JAGRITI: A SOCIETY OF RURAL WOMEN

It was to save the wild apricot trees from being axed to make way for more lucrative apple trees in Kullu-Manali that Jagriti, a community-based organisation engaged in making herbal and organically produced goods, came into being. With the new health *mantra* being on the use of organic and natural products over 1,000 hard working women of Kullu is taking their products like rose-mint herbal tea, peach and apricot scrub soaps to foreign markets. Jagriti has won the SEED Award 2008, given by the UNDP's United Nation Environment Programme. Jagriti is a community based registered society operating in district Kullu for the empowerment of poor, disadvantaged Hill women. The society firmly believe that the key to lasting change in immoral societal structures lies in nurturing the inherent strengths of vulnerable groups especially women, to change and build a more equitable society. The aim of the society is to work for the empowerment of poor, rural hill women. The society works through a network of women's savings and credit groups, which are more than 140 in number with an active membership of over 1400 women. The society's main concern focuses at promotion of alternative income enhancement opportunities, encouraging adoption of drudgery reducing and energy effective devices together with conservation and sustainable harvest of non-timber forest produce from wild. The society has successfully developed value-added products from locally available semi-wild fruits and also striven to market vanishing traditional crops such as buckwheat, millets and so on. The main projects run by the society are:

A. Conservation of Threatened Medicinal Plants: High altitude medicinal plants species i.e. Atees, Kutki, mushkbala and Shingli-Mingli are being raised in the nursery and planting is carried out in some sites. Useful tree species like the wild or bitter apricot, walnut and wild peach, green oak are also raised in the nursery and given to villagers for plantation on their own land. Society has explored different approaches to conserve and produce medicinal plant species threatened in the wild. Improved marketing and market access to farmers for wild collected or organically grown medicinal plants holds a major potential to encourage villagers to take up medicinal plant related activities in a better way.

B. Ecological Sanitation: Insufficient sanitation facilities with increasing population and decreasing vegetation cover in most villages have aggravated the problem, especially for women and young girls. Reluctance to construct toilets is mainly due lack of awareness and scarcity of space in closely settled villages. Those

who have constructed the expensive water-based toilets are incapable of keeping them clean due to scarcity of water. As a result, the majority of members prefer going out in the open. The concerns regarding high cost of construction and accessibility of water and carrying it on a daily basis is yet another reason why sanitation facilities elude the majority of households in remote and far flung villages. Composting toilets in the mountain region is a suitable option, especially in remote areas where traditional sewer line or septic tanks construction is not possible or very costly. These toilets use little or no water, do not stink and once properly made can last for 8 to 10 years for a family of six. In this initiative, the society is promoting different models with location specific amendment. The society is also generating awareness through serial meetings and onsite training on construction of eco-toilets.

C. Energy-saving and Drudgery reducing devices: For women the burden of gathering firewood is back-breaking and inexorable, getting worse with deforestation and forest degradation. This liability, is adding to women's reproductive role, confines women to their homes, efficiently excluding them from any active and consistent participation in community social life. In order to reduce daily drudgery especially of poorer women, the society is encouraging energy saving devices. The society has introduced energy saving and drudgery reducing devices namely, Liquefied Petroleum Gas (LPG), Pressure Cooker, *Hamam* (Water heating device) and *Tandoor* (Metallic stove). Making energy services available to women served as an initial point on the road to gradual and eventual empowerment and resultant social change. The sense of accomplishment generated along with the impacts of time saving has reduced drudgery and improved health of women.

D. Conservation of traditional crops: The aim of society is to:

- (a) create "niche" market for traditional crops through value added product range, thereby creating economic incentives for cultivation;
- (b) revive social, cultural and ethno food habits based on nutritional aspect of multiple grain intake, and
- (c) introduce post-harvest technologies to reduce drudgery involved in dehusking and grinding.

The society is focusing on amaran thus, finger millet, buckwheat, foxtail millet, proso millet.

E. Conservation of Indigenous Bees: Forest honey has been collected by mountain people for millennia. Its medicinal value and use as a nutrition supplement is well recognized, making it a high value non-timber forest product (NTFP). The project launched by the society aims to conserve the indigenous bees by developing honey and other value added by-products and create awareness of critical role of bees in pollination of crops and promotion of sustainable harvesting practices.

F. Education: The project rationale springs from a growing realization that, in order to sustain and improve quality of life of the rural poor, quality education of children holds the key to the future and there are no shortcuts. The project launched by society is aimed at familiarizing with collaborative learning methods to increase pass percentage of children and arrest dropout rate.

The society is making a number of products such as- bath & body care products; herbs & spices; herbal tea; natural food. Thus, *Jagriti* has come a long way as its products made from all locally grown raw materials and aptly named “*Mountain Bounties*” are making an impact in the market, especially amongst foreigners. It is clear that Self Help Group (SHG) is one of the vital tools for socially & financially empowering the women. Formation of self-help groups have promoted learning through experience and have empowered women as they learn to become independent and self-reliant. Women in rural areas are usually illiterate and poor. They need to be constantly motivated and educated through training, discussions, and awareness campaigns on matters of concern for women. Such endeavours have unleashed the inborn potential of rural women, independently and capability to work together. While going through the case studies the following inference can be drawn. These Self Help Groups are:

1. Acting as a change mediator with long-term reliability to the community;
2. Developing a concern for sustainable use of resources and their benefits;
3. Inculcating a feeling of independence and increases the levels of self-identity, self-reliance and self-respect among women;
4. Instilling the values of diligence and hard work for achieving success among rural masses;
5. Encouraging the awareness generation on ecological issues, afforestation, culture and nature preservation among rural women;;
6. Resulting in conversion from “non-sustainable coping livelihoods” to “sustainable” livelihoods;
7. Sustaining the expectations of key stakeholders;
8. Sharing the goal, concerns, ethics, and ethnicity; and
9. Supporting value-added or desirable activities which don't pose any threat to resources

CONCLUSION

Based on the evidence along with a more strict explanation of women empowerment, it is difficult to believe that a modest micro-finance programme would have sustainable impact on the empowerment of women. SHGs, where most of groups are linked with the help of NGOs that offer support in financial services and specific training, have a greater capability to make an promising impact on women empowerment. If women empowerment is to be pursued as a serious objective by SHG programmes in particular and the larger micro finance community at large, greater stress should be on training, education and awareness generation in order to realize a larger and more lasting empowerment. There is need of supporting the existing forum for rural women to discuss their personal, family, social, economic as well as spiritual concerns. Influencing the existing governance and service structures to encourage good practices can take care of the self-esteem of women and boost-up their access to justice and development resources.

REFERENCES

Blanchard, K. H. John, P.C., and Alan, R. (1996) *Empowerment Takes More than a Minute*, Berrett-Koehler Publishers, San Francisco, California.

Gobezie, G. (2011) Empowerment of Women and Gender Mainstreaming in Rural Microfinance. Expert Group Meeting Enabling Rural women's Economic Empowerment: Institutions, Opportunities and Participation. UN Women in cooperation with FAO, IFAD and WFP. pp.1-17.

Kabeer, N. (2001) Conflicts over credit: Re-evaluating the empowerment potential of loans to women in rural Bangladesh. *World Development*, 29(1), 63-84

Mayoux, L. (2000) Microfinance and the empowerment of women: A review of the key issues. Social Finance Unit Working Paper, 23, ILO, Geneva

Rapport, J. (1987) Terms of empowerment/exemplars of prevention: Towards a theory of community psychology. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 15(2):121-148.

Staples (1990) Powerful ideas about Empowerment. *Administration in Social Work*, 14(2): 29-42.

Sudharani, K., Sreelatha K. and Surendra, G. (2000) Empowerment of women in rural areas. *Rural India*, pp. 195-198.

Vaiyda, V. (2004) A situational analysis of Girls & women in Himachal Pradesh, National Commission for Women, New Delhi

