



DR. NAVAL JOSHI

**Central Himalayan Environment Association (NGO)  
And Rural Women : A Study With Special Reference  
To Kumaun Region : A Case Study**Mallital, Nainital, Uttarakhand and Professor ILA SAH, Department of Sociology,  
S.S.J. University, Almora, (Uttarakhand) India

Received-18.07.2022, Revised-25.07.2022, Accepted-30.07.2022 E-mail: navaljoshintl2008@gmail.com

**Abstract:** *Whenever there is a talk of 'Development', that is development of India, which is almost 70% still agrarian and rural or the talk focusing on the development of Uttarakhand that is beset with numerous problems, the term NGO invariably crops up. Since, no basic research work is in existence at the present that adequately conceptualizes and recognizes the role and contribution of NGOs in the development of the rural women of Uttarakhand, the present study is geared towards providing the same by focusing on a particular NGO CENTRAL HIMALAYAN ENVIRONMENT ASSOCIATION(CHEA) and its various programmes for the empowerment of rural women in Kumaun Region through their SHG formation programmes. Therefore, the need was felt that a Case Study of CHEA (NGO) in Kumaun region be studied in their entirety and particularly engaged in the empowerment of Rural Women. The present work, in its sociological recognition arrives to view that CHEA (NGO) as a 'Material Social Institution', that is unique and which is distinct from other social; institutions that engage at the very grassroots. Therefore, the study was primarily theoretical and descriptive in character, based upon objective observation in the field and assimilation of materials in literature.*

**Key Words: CHEA (NGO), Kumaun Region, Self Help Group, Mahila Mangal Dal, Purposive, Development.**

**INTRODUCTION - UTTARAKHAND & RURAL WOMEN-** Uttarakhand is environmentally fragile and geologically unstable because it lies in the tectonic and tertiary mountains of Himalayan of recent origin. The land of Himalayan is not properly used as it is prone to heavy erosion. During rain all the precious top soil is denuded transported and deposited in plains. During the denudation heavy erosion, floods, landslides and other hazards occurs. So the geographical and geological unstableness of this area creates more problems to rural women. India means Rural India.

Government has introduced various programmes towards empowerment of rural women but it failed due to the lack of practical implementation that is why NGOs came into existence. NGOs are primarily a modern phenomenon.

**SCOPE OF THE STUDY-** In this context, developing the programmes for the rural women, self help group has gained recognition and accepted as one of the new paradigms for combating poverty through socio-economic development of rural women, with special emphasis on empowerment of rural women. The study aims to assess the empowerment of rural women (Kumaun Region) by CHEA (NGO) through their women SHG formation and linkages Programmes.

Several studies in the past have concentrated on all NGOs as a unit, but this case study on a particular NGO that is CHEA and rural women of Kumaun Region will provide an insight view of working of NGO and implementing their programmes for empowerment of rural women through SHG approach.

**CENTRAL HIMALAYAN ENVIRONMENT ASSOCIATION (NGO) A brief-** The Central Himalayan Environment Association (CHEA) is a non-profit, independent body, registered under the societies Registration Act XXI of 1860. In the course of about two decade time, CHEA (NGO) has contributed to creating conditions that enable village communities to manage natural resources and benefit from them on a sustainable basis. The association is committed to the cause of sustainable development.

In its initial years CHEA (NGO) operated from Botany Department, D.S.B. Campus, Kumaun University, Nainital. In 2003 active office was shifted to 09 Waldorf Compound, Mallital, Nainital. Since then CHEA (NGO) is operating its operations from this new office with new initiatives. Livelihood & Sustainable Development Programme



(LSDP), focused on action and outreach activities, integrating livelihood perspectives with environment and development that promise to yield income generating options, such as eco-tourism and markets for organic products for strengthening livelihood security of the marginalized hill population.

The Prominences of CHEA (NGO) are -

- Environment
- Human Resource Development
- Livelihood & Sustainable Development
- Infrastructure Development
- Social Development
- Research and Development

**SHG FORMATION UNDER CHEA NGO** - CHEA (NGO) four programmes of SHG formation of rural women in Kumaun region are considered for study of their empowerment are:

- Kosi Valley Action Research Project
- Strengthening community managed institution (Van Panchayat) for enhancing livelihood options in Lamgara Development Block, Almora.
- Aajeevika: An IFAD assisted Project in Kapkot Development Block, Bageshwar.
- SHG Formation and Linkages Programme under NABARD in Tarikhet Development Block, Almora.

Participation of Women in some of the Projects - Though various projects are being implemented by CHEA in Kumaun Region but a brief about the participation of women in Almora and Bageshwar district where some of the projects under CHEA (NGO) are summarized in the table below:

**Number of Women SHG & Women Members**

Project	SHG No.	Women SHG	Total Members	Women Members
Aajeevika: IFAD	79	59	921	882
Van Panchayat: SDTT	-	43	-	398
SHG Formation & Linkages: NABARD	30	11	338	179
Kosi Valley	-	13 (MMD/WWA)	-	191

**SEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY - CASE STUDY**- A case study is a research method common in social science. It is based on an in-depth investigation of a single individual, group, or event. Case studies may be descriptive or explanatory. The latter type is used to explore causation in order to find underlying principles.

**Clarification of Concepts - The major concepts used in this research are as follows-**

**Rural Women**- Women who live in villages and whose main occupation is agriculture and allied activities like dairy farming vegetable growing and cottage industries are rural women. Rural women work very hard but have a lower status due to prevalence of patriarchal norms. Most rural women are poor, uneducated and unaware of their rights. They are controlled by their men folk and cannot take their own decisions. But in modern times changes are taking place in the awareness and capabilities of rural women and they are gradually getting empowered through various NGOs. The largest number of working women in India is engaged in farming operations, either as cultivators or labourers in villages.

**Gender Relations**- These encompass the interactions between men and women in various domains and power relations between the two sexes, knowledge of which is necessary to understand the situation of women. Gender relations show the relative social positions of men and women. They are constructed and maintained through a complex array of factors that are formed according to social, cultural and historical circumstances. All norms



regarding matters of production, consumption and distribution as well as division of labour are in favour of men. Thus inequality prevails in the gender relationship by assigning a subordinate position to women and not acknowledging their contribution. Gender relations ascribe different attributes, attitudes, desires, personality traits and behavioural patterns to men and women.

**Empowerment of Rural Women Through CHEA (NGO)-** This is an inclusive term which means not only economic independence but also increase in self confidence and decision making ability. A woman is truly empowered if she can enhance her self confidence and status within her family as independent producer of wealth and provide finance to her household. Empowerment is a process whereby women gain the ability to make independent choices over their activities and control over resources, become self reliant and overcome subordination. Thus there are many indicators to measure empowerment of women. The following four variables were selected for the present research.

**Political Participation-** Lester Milbrath has divided society into four categories on the basis of the degree of political participation, namely, those who are apathetic, those who are involved in spectator activities like voting, those involved in transitional activities like attending political meetings and those who enter political arena and stand for or hold party offices. In the present study all four categories of women were identified by data collection.

**Economic Independence-** It means not only earning money but also being able to spend it independently. Control over financial and productive resources, by working women or housewives can be considered economic independence.

**Decision making Ability-** Here again, any woman, whether working or non-working, who can make independent choices and has a say in the decisions made in family and community is said to possess the ability of decision making. It has been noted that women who earn by working outside home have greater decision making ability.

**Access to Basic Facilities-** This includes availability and access to health and hygiene facilities like pure drinking water, sanitation, primary health centre; access to nutritious food, availability of clean and well ventilated homes and satisfaction of minimum needs.

**Methodology-** The present study is a descriptive study of rural women living in Kumaun Region who have been empowered by CHEA (NGO) and their Livelihood & Sustainable Development Programme (LSDP).

Objectives of the study - The main objectives are as follows:

1. To study the four variables chosen as indices for empowerment of women, namely, (1) the extent of political participation by the women after participating in the programmes of CHEA (NGO), (2) the extent of economic independence of the women after participating in the programmes of CHEA (NGO), (3) extent of participation of women in decision making processes after participating in the programmes of CHEA (NGO) and (4) the extent to which women have access to basic facilities in Kumaun Region.

2. To find out reasons for either satisfactory or unsatisfactory conditions of women.

**Research Design-** The design for the present research has been formulated on the basis of the aims and objectives of the study. This is mainly a descriptive study which tries to explain the conditions of the sample. A descriptive study is designed to obtain information concerning the current status of phenomenon. The aim is to explain 'what exists' with respect to variables or conditions in a situation. Data were collected through interview with a view to describe and analyse the various structures and their functions which were related to the four variables under study. On the basis of these data conclusion were drawn.

**Universe -** The universe for the study is the Kumaun Region where CHEA (NGO) programme are undergoing. A sample of 100 women was selected by purposive sampling in Kumaun Region where CHEA four Project Kosi Valley Action Research Project (KOVARP) in Khulghad Micro Water-shed, Strengthening Rural Community Managed



Natural Resource Institution (Van Panchayat) for enhancing livelihood in Lamgara block, Livelihood Improvement Project for the Himalayas in Kapkot block Bagheswar (Ajeevika) : An IFAD (International Fund For Agriculture Development) Assisted Project, and SHG formation and Linkages Programme in Tarikhet Development block had been implemented or undergoing. To collect data, primary method like interview schedule and observation was applied. Observation technique was applied from beginning to end of research. Twenty-five women from each of the four project mentioned above under CHEA (NGO) were purposively selected because of their leadership traits and of their being active participants.

**Sample-** A sample is a representative portion of a whole. Sampling technique is very important in research because it is essential that a representative sample is selected to achieve reliable conclusion. There is various type of sampling technique; two major types are random sampling and purposive sampling. The researcher adopted purposive sampling because it was more suitable and practical. In purposive sampling the researcher is familiar with the universe hence is able to select a representative sample. In present case the researcher had made many preliminary visits and a pilot study in order to help in selecting a sample. Twenty-five women were selected from each of the selected four Projects under CHEA NGO. Overall 100 women were purposively selected to collect data through interview schedule because of their leadership traits and of their being active participants.

**Tools and Techniques of Data Collection -** There are various method of collecting primary data for research work. Some important techniques are observation, questionnaire and interview schedule. The researcher used the techniques of interview schedule as well observation.

Observation is probably the oldest method of inquiry. P V Young defines observation as 'a systematic and deliberate study through the eye of spontaneous occurrences at the time they occur'. Interview has been defined by P V Young as a systematic method by which a person enters more or less imaginatively into the inner life of a comparative stranger. It is a face to face contact between the interviewer (researcher or data collector) and the interviewee (respondent or informer) when the former asks questions which are answered by the latter. To make the interview more scientific and systematic a schedule or a set of question is prepared by the researcher beforehand and it is administered to all respondents in the same way to avoid any bias. The answer is noted down by the researcher himself. Although the process is time consuming it yields excellent results if the interview is performed properly. Secondly it can be used for both educated as well as uneducated people.

In the present study, an exhaustive schedule was prepared with questions about socio-economic status and some questions about general awareness and personal attitudes and aspirations were formulated. The interviews are direct transcriptions but the material was translated from Hindi into English.

**Analysis of Data -** After the data was collected it was divided into homogenous and heterogeneous groups according to the coding design that had been prepared for this purpose. It was a classification denoting a process of arranging things in groups or classes according to the resemblance and affinities and giving expression to the unity of attributes that may exist among diversity of individuals. Then the data was tabulated. Tabulation is the simplest form of representing research findings. Finally the data was interpreted by finding correlations and casual relations among variables.

**Significance of the study-** The present study is very important as women's empowerment by NGOs is an issue which is centre stage in National planning presently. Such micro studies provide significant information about the reality of the efforts to empower women by NGOs. Empowerment is important for all women but since rural women are more oppressed, greater emphasis is on their empowerment by NGOs, therefore this study will provide valuable data regarding the level of rural women's empowerment and the extent to which various schemes of the Government and NGO's have been implemented and are successful in empowering women.

**ROLE AND CONTRIBUTION OF CHEA NGO -** In his study researcher selected twenty-five women



from each project/ programme from four selected programme implemented or undergoing programme of CHEA (NGO). Only researcher observation and study alone cannot conclude the above mentioned result henceforth the response of rural women were collected, tabulated and analysed. By carrying out and studying about CHEA(NGO) and their four project, the researcher finds out that development is a long going and well planned activity. In process of development organisation do faces the internal as well as external constraints but at end the result is foreseen. During his finding researcher observes many constraints were faced by CHEA (NGO) and regarding that CHEA team member have done a remarkable job in empowering rural women of Kumaun Region by forming of Self Help Group (SHG) and others group of women like Mahila Mangal Dal (Women Welfare Association). These groups consist of that women having same ideology, social and economic conditions.

**Their response are tabulated and analysed in five respects-**

1. Political Participation and Rural Women
2. Socio-Economic Condition
3. Decision making process
4. Women's access to basic facilities
5. Economic Independence of Women

**CONCLUSION-** The four variables were dealt with, and its result gave an over view of the level of empowerment in general and also pointed out the various hindrances which prevent many of the rural women from attaining a satisfactory level of empowerment.

With regard to political participation it was noted that 84 per cent respondents were involved in political activities to varying extents, while 26% were apathetic to politics. The categories of political participation used were those given by Lester Milbrath. Of the 84% respondents, 42% were involved in spectator activity, i.e., voting and discussing politics; 25% were involved in transitional activity i.e. attending political meetings and contributing to political party funds and 21% were involved in gladiatorial activity i.e. holding party posts and Panchayat posts. This shows that political participation of the sample is quite satisfactory.

Political participation of women is quite low all over the world because politics is generally considered a male occupation. Considering this attitude, we find that women in the present sample take part in politics in good numbers. Keeping the above attitude in mind, the respondents were asked whether it was considered good for women to take part in politics and 62% replied in the affirmative. This also shows that the environment in the sample villages is very conducive for women's participation in politics. Generally politics is not considered a suitable activity for women; therefore very few women take part in it. But in the villages, after the 73rd Amendment 33 per cent seats were reserved for women candidates in Panchayat elections and the men folk see this as a good opportunity to capture power by encouraging their women to contest these reserved seats. Therefore women's participation in politics is now acceptable to most people.

While many rural women are active in politics now, quite a few of them do not know much and act as told by their husbands. This is not a healthy sign as it shows that their political empowerment is not real, but gradually women are learning to do things on their own. When asked whether women members of Panchayat took decisions on their own or obeyed the decisions of their husbands, 65 per cent respondents said that women take their own decisions, and on being asked about effectiveness of women Pradhans, 62 per cent said they were effective. During data collection and interviews it was found that while some women Pradhans are led by their husbands totally, some others are very independent and take decisions on their own. They are quite effective and popular too. This shows that women have to learn about the functioning of the Panchayat and understand their roles and their powers in order to perform their duties effectively on their own. In some other villages there were male Pradhans but they said that women were active in politics and there were women members in all Panchayats. Some questions were put to the



respondents to find out their awareness level and also their knowledge about empowerment. For instance they were asked what all should be done to empower women: 29% said women should be educated, 31% said they should become economically independent, 12% said their awareness should increase, 8% said their self confidence should increase and only 10% said they should get political power. Very few 10% said they should be given their rights. These answers show a maturity of thinking which is rare among uneducated women. They know that one has to work hard to be empowered; not by just demanding rights. Roseanne Barr has said the same thing in her writing, "Nobody gives you power you just take it".

They also understand that not everyone can get political power; therefore a small number mentioned it, whereas education and economic independence are necessary for all women to achieve real empowerment. Another question was about knowledge of special facilities for women. Only 71 percent respondents said they are aware of special facilities for women but 74 per cent said that if they come to know of these facilities they will be allowed to benefit through them by their men folk. While the percentage of women who know about facilities is low. It is heartening that a big number wants to avail of them and feels that there should not be any hindrance in availing of these facilities. This shows the women in the sample villages want to improve and have enough freedom to make efforts to improve their condition. Since political status of women is reflected by the extent of freedom granted to women with regard to their participation in political activity, it can be concluded, on the basis of above data, those women in the sample villages have a satisfactory level of political participation.

Decision making is an important tool of empowerment. Women who can take correct decisions independently are truly empowered. Rural women are generally not allowed to take their own decisions, although they are mostly consulted before decisions are taken by men; but with women participating in politics through the Panchayats, they have also started taking their own decisions. Many women Pradhans have proved that they can take good decisions and implement them to promote welfare and progress. On the other hand many women Pradhans follow the decisions of their husbands. This does not prove that they are not capable of taking decisions on their own, but they are used to obey their husbands and not assert themselves. Women have to be motivated to use their reasoning power for decision making and to assert themselves to get their decisions accepted. Of course good reasoning requires intelligence. Education and awareness increase intelligence. In the rural set up very often experience improves intelligence. Many illiterate women are competent enough to take correct decisions regarding the welfare of the villagers because of their vast experience of rural life.

It was found that in the present sample, 54 per cent respondents are consulted by their husbands in taking important decisions and 45 per cent are consulted in money matters. This shows that women are given importance in decision making process, be it of financial nature or social nature. More than a half of the respondents, 57% said they are allowed to take important decisions independently. This shows that these women have proved their good sense to family members, who are confident that their decisions would be correct. All these data show that women in the sample participate in decision making process to a satisfactory extent. Besides this, the respondents were asked many questions to test their ability to take good decisions and their power of correct judgment they were asked whether women should go out to work with men in different occupations and 43 per cent said they should. When questioned about status of women today, 61 per cent said it is better now. Among the factors responsible for this improvement, the most important for them was greater education, (28%) followed by employment (26%), more independence (14%) and freedom to go out (9%). These answers show that the respondents are very practical in their thinking and have given good replies. On the basis of all the data presented above regarding the respondents' political participation and participation in decision making process, it can be concluded that rural women take part to a satisfactory extent in politics and decision making process. With regard to access to drinking water, 41% said they are fully satisfied and 59% said they are not highly satisfied because running water is not available always in the taps.



When there is shortage of water in almost all cities, one cannot expect to have running water always. Thus in effect 51% respondents have satisfactory access to drinking water and 49% said water supply was bad. These respondents were mostly the ones who do not get their water from taps but from hand pumps and wells. The main source of water for household purpose was the tap 51% while 11% use water from hand pumps and 7% from wells and 31% by other means. Thus it can be said that access to water is not satisfactory and same with the access to other facilities like healthcare and nutrition is not very satisfactory, as shown by data. When asked about the presence of Primary Health Centers in the villages only 30% respondents said there are Health Centers in their village. This may not be very true because there is a Health Centre in almost every village but some do not function regularly or efficiently so many villagers do not visit them instead they go to private doctors. This shows that although the facility is available it is not being used by villagers, either because it does not satisfy their needs or because it is not provided properly. Besides the health centers there are also Aanganwadis where small children, young girls and pregnant and lactating mothers are provided some medical facilities like immunization, vitamins, iron capsules and iodised salt.

Regarding nutrition it was found that 83% respondents said they got good food to eat, but in reality their food is not really nutritious. In villages people are used to eating more of cereals and less of other food items like pulses, vegetables, and protein rich foods, specially the women do not get these food items in sufficient amounts. This is the trend in urban families also, because of patriarchal norms. Lack of knowledge of nutritious foods and their importance in good health and in prevention of diseases is also a factor, especially in villages. Women have to be made aware of importance of good nutrition and how it can be provided without much Expenditure. They have also to be taught how to cut, clean and cook vegetables in order to retain their nutrition value as much as possible. They have to be told what simple steps should be taken to prevent diseases and also how to handle common health problems of children. The mass media and CHEA (NGO) are spreading awareness but there is need to work on a personalized basis.

In the sample 44% respondents said they have milch cattle at home so it can be assumed that they get sufficient amount of milk, at least for children, but the others may find it difficult to buy enough milk for all family members.

In our country, it can be said that their nutrition is not bad although it is not ideal, but it was noticed in the villages that there were some very poor people who appeared really under nourished. Such people have to be helped in which-ever way possible to get better food. It is very sad that villagers who provide food to the whole country should remain under nourished themselves. Access to facilities like adult literacy, vocational training, special programmes for women, is not satisfactory. The most important reason for this is the apathy of rural women. They are generally not interested in learning new skills, be it reading or stitching. They are keen that their daughters get good education and vocational training but they feel they are too old to learn or say they have no time. Of course there are some exceptions.

With regard to economic independence the data show that 23% respondents said that they have access to personal income, either through wages or selling handicrafts etc. but most of them earn less than 200 rupees per month. Nearly all of them said they spend it on children and family needs. A majority of the respondents 45% are satisfied that they are consulted in money matters and 31% are allowed to spend money on their own although they do not earn money.

Although the respondents seem satisfied there is need for them to achieve economic independence in the true sense by earning money through employment or entrepreneurship.

The researcher found out that only a few groups have been successful in running their business and making profits. Several groups have been discontinued because the members took loans and did not return or because the members could not make profits through their activities. CHEA (NGO) is doing a good job by imparting training to



women and helping them sell the finished products, but more efforts are required. Economic independence improves the status of the women in their families and also gives them greater role in decision-making process. Secondly it increases the self-confidence of the women and makes them more dignified. The rural women are benefiting through self help groups formed by CHEA (NGO) team members.

In the light of available data the conclusion is that the access to basic facilities and level of economic independence is not very satisfactory among the respondents and should improve. Unsatisfactory levels may be due to ground realities and social set up and it has been found that ground realities are more responsible than social setup.

This study shows that the rural women of Kumaun Region were able to empower themselves through formation of Self Help Groups by CHEA (NGO). They were helped by a conscientious government official in achieving success but after their departing they faced difficulties. This shows that if there is proper implementation of programmes for community development and if efficient supervision is available then empowerment of rural people, especially women, is possible.

**Suggestions-** This study shows that Political Participation and Decision making of rural women have increased to a satisfactory extent but economic independence and basic amenities have not increased to satisfactory extent because of ground realities and traditional set up. Some practical suggestions are mentioned below which may definitely help in empowering rural women.

- (a) During interviewing rural women almost all respondents were fed up and highly stressed with alcoholism problem in their villages. They compelled researcher to sort out this problem and same was conveyed to various Government officials as well as to CHEA (NGO) team member and their council by researcher. Against this they have also agitated, but problem remains same. So it is suggested to Government policy makers and executing officials to ban all the liquor shops nearby rural villages and look for other options to increase their revenue. This will not only save Government exchequer which they proposed to expend on rural areas but will also earn them honour in getting satisfactory results.
- (b) Study must be carried out in tackling alcoholism problem in rural villages where rural women shoulder most of the responsibility of their household and society.
- (c) The study revealed that the maximum numbers of rural women are allowed to avail benefits which have been implemented by Government agencies and by NGOs. Still awareness programmes of taking benefits and empowering of remaining women is required, and this can be achieved by SHGs women by influencing other women's to participate in various programmes, so that they may also get empowered.
- (d) Basic amenities like Primary Health Center, water supply, electricity, education, transportation facilities, sanitation etc must be provided to all of our rural women as this will only raise their standard of living which will promote them to contribute in strengthening our country in all aspects.
- (e) All NGOs must have alternative financial resources, so that they may continue implementing their programmes once their funding is stopped by funding agencies.
- (f) Generally it is observed that SHGs women are totally dependent on implementing agencies for each activity, henceforth SHGs women must not stop their work of empowering themselves when implementing agencies withdraw from various projects. They must learn to carry out various activities independently and effectively.
- (g) SHGs women must spend their money judiciously as this will only strengthen their future prospects.
- (h) Continuous monitoring is required of all NGOs by their funding agencies as this will create pressure to achieve fruitful target set by funding agencies.
- (i) Proper methodology must be adopted by implementing agencies while implementing their programmes. Generally it is observed that no specific research design is adopted while implementing programmes henceforth resulting in failures of various programmes, which create inconsistency in minds of beneficiaries and community





people, and thus losing their faith in implementing them.

(j) A healthy psychological relation must be established between implementing agencies and community people so that targets are achieved smoothly.

(k) Employees of implementing agencies must be well informed with universe and local language.

(l) It is suggested that NGOs must take up new responsibilities such as social development, use of science and technology in the rural areas, human resource development etc for empowerment of rural women.

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