

# **EMPOWERING MOUNTAIN WOMEN THROUGH COLLECTIVE ENTERPRISE**

*(Rawain Women Multipurpose Autonomous Co-operative Society Ltd. )*

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Uttaranchal, traditionally known as Uttrakhand, is a land of rich natural and cultural heritage. The Uttaranchal people live mainly from agriculture, horticulture and dairying. Like other societies in the world, the Uttrakhand society is also marked by an unequal division of labor, power and property between male and female. Women are very hardworking. They toil hard in the field to provide food to the family, carry out household responsibilities, take care of the livestock, procure fuel, water and minor forest produce to meet the survival needs of the family. They have a very important role in the subsistence economy, but this is considered only secondary to the role of the men. Women are economically, socially and emotionally dependent on the male head of their family.

Rawain Valley of district Uttarkashi is famous for his cultural traditions and low rate of migration of men folk in comparison to other districts of Uttaranchal. Most of the men and women are engaged in agricultural activities for their livelihoods. When HARC started its intervention in Rawain valley it noticed the low level of awareness among women and realized that they do not get an opportunity to participate in village meetings or any decision-making process at the community level. The men have control over all the cash, and there is no conducive environment and social acceptance for women to start income generation activities like trading of agriculture produce. Due to these prevailing social norms, women had always been given the secondary status in society and were not valued for their traditional knowledge, practical experiences, and managerial skills. Women, themselves, did not recognize their qualities and potential, and accepted their status as a part of their lives. Women also lacked an entrepreneurial attitude.

To address these issues in a holistic and integrated way, the Himalayan Action Research Center (HARC) embarked on a process of building and strengthening Women groups and their federation to increase food and socioeconomic security, and promote their livelihood options. HARC set out on a slow but determined process of developing women's entrepreneurial disposition and enhancing their decision making participation, income-generating ability, and socio economic status in the community.

Income generation activity can be an important tool for economic empowerment of women, provided they are given proper opportunities, facilities and guidance to carry out such activities. Rawain women self-help group federation has utilized the local resources and brought the traditional products into the market, and thereby set up an example of micro-enterprise in whole Uttranchal. This federation is becoming the source of inspiration for women of other areas also.

Rawain Women Multipurpose Autonomous Co-operative Society Ltd. is an autonomous body came into existence on 03rd October 2002 for the socio-economic empowerment of

women. 17 self-help groups, involved in income generation activities, motivated by HARC came together to form women Co-operative. 213 members of different groups contributed a sum of Rs. 600 each as share to build their capital fund to start trade orientated activities. The directors of Co-operative in consultant with member groups decided to procure and sell local pulses, spices, millets and processed items made of locally available fruits and vegetables. At present the Co-operative is trading in 32 items having a network of more than 80 retailers and also supplying its product to other states- Delhi, Gujrat, Andra pradesh, Rajsthan, Haryana, Uttar pradesh etc.

## **Process of Formation of women's collectives**

Because of socio cultural barriers, women had very limited say and accesses to decision-making then men were present in the meetings. After a long discussion with the village men and women, it as decided that women farmers' self-help groups and men farmers' interest groups would be formed and strengthened in the village.



In the first phase HARC started a campaign to facilitate the process of group formation among the women in the village. This campaign focused on sensitizing women towards the importance and benefits of being organized. Motivators and paratechs, who took the lead in this process, tried to convince the people that a collective approach could enhance their socioeconomic status, sometimes citing examples of success stories of women collectives in other villages. This process, started in 67 villages of Rawain Valley, eventually led to the formation of 182 women's groups doing their own saving and credit activities. This could happen only because of the intensive support of those men folk of the village who have a very positive attitude for the advancement of the village women.

HARC built a cadre of women motivators in the area. 43 women motivators underwent multifaceted capacity enhancement trainings, and by the end of one year were ready to pass on what they had learned. These motivators were very instrumental in building the environment for enhancing women's participation in preparing the village action plan according to their and the local people's needs and priorities.

## **Knowledge and skill building**

After the formation of women's collectives in the villages, the second most important intervention was to strengthen these collectives. The second phase was focused on enhancing management and operational skill of women. To increase the skill, knowledge and information level of women HARC organized exposure and capacity-building programs on various issues, such as building an understanding of group dynamics, management, leadership, process of saving, inter loaning, accounts management and documentation. Village information centers were established to enhance the access of women to all development information.

HARC encouraged the men folk to send the women to attend these programs. In some places where women's participation in meetings and trainings was very low, the men were asked to help ensure women's participation. Women motivators took care of motivating the women of the village. This process took almost one year.

## **Need for formation of Women Federation :**

As a result of continuous intervention of HARC, strong self-help group emerged in various villages. Some of the groups started small income generation activities with the help of HARC. Through regular interaction and sharing of the learnings, HARC made the groups realized to federate themselves for addressing larger issues related to socio-economic and political empowerment of women. To see the importance and development of entrepreneurial attitude among women now it was a felt need to organize these groups into bigger organization i.e. federation. Under this process HARC organized village level meetings, debates and awareness & orientation programs etc on the importance of, federation and its role in facilitating income generation activities based on local resources. A study tour was also organized for the office bearer of the groups to visit and understand the internal process of Samradhi women Co-operative in Thakurdwar at Himachal Pradesh.

At that time, however, there was no women's federation for trading anywhere in Utranchal. It was decided then that a women-only federation should be formed by the women collectives engaged in income generation activities in order to give women equal opportunity to manage and control a trade, make their own decisions, and have control over their financial and marketing dealings without interference from others. The men folk were invited to the meetings so that they would realize the importance of their support to the women. Thus, the women's federation was formed without any objection from the men folk of the villages.

## **Income generation activities by women groups**

As the process of strengthening of women's collectives went on, some groups felt the need to start income-generating projects (IGP) to earn cash. To address this need, an intensive exercise on identification of the income generation activities was conducted at the group level. Most of the women groups agreed that the income generating activity must be based on their local agro-eco resources. After conducting the resource analysis exercise with the women, it was decided unanimously that women would increase the production of traditional crops, pulses, grains, spices, millets, and market the surplus produce. Production of jam, pickle, juice, and squash, along with locally available raw materials, were also included in the IGP.

Those groups that were mature enough and had a good record of group management, had strong and effective leadership, and had saved some amount of money to start an IGP were given entrepreneurship development training. Agro-eco based, specifically biomass-based, activities - the prevailing subsistence economy in the mountain areas - became the main IGP of the groups. Agro-eco based income generation activities are cost-effective

and socially acceptable, and the resources, skills and market are locally available, so the chances of success are great. Although women showed their willingness to start IGP, it was not an easy task for women. Secondly, finding spare time from their busy schedule was itself problematic.

In rural areas women do all of the agricultural work but the men of the family are the ones who sell the surplus produce in the market. Women had no access to market and cash handling. These socio cultural barriers made the task of engaging women to start IGPs in trading activities a big challenge for HARC. So initially, the strategy of income generation was adopted only among a small group of women at village level. Since men farmers were dealing with the marketing of fruits and vegetables, women farmers decided to buy and market pulses, grains, millets, spices and some processed items made with locally available raw materials. All these arrangements helped in getting the men folk to share in the agricultural activities, thus reducing women's agricultural workload.



HARC organized a number of trainings for enhancing women's risk-taking capacities, fruit and vegetable processing skills, grading and packaging, quality control and cost analysis of the products. Women of the groups started collecting surplus products and after grading, packing and labeling, the products were sold in the local market and some in big cities during fairs and exhibitions. This was the first attempt of women in trading, and the first time the women of Rawain could get direct cash in their hands by selling agro-eco products. It was only a small-scale venture, but because they invested their own money, time, and energy, they felt confident and realized their power and potential to establish micro enterprises that are managed and controlled by women only. Extension centers in and outside of the state helped women enhance their skills in crop production, processing of the raw materials, and quality control of the products.

## **Developing financial and rural marketing linkages**

### **The need to build a capital fund**

The first attempt of women in a trading activity was quite encouraging, but they had to face a lot of challenges. The biggest challenges were: improving and maintaining the quality of the products; tough competition in the market; and lack of marketing skills among women. These indicated the need for combined efforts in women's trading activities.

These women collectives held several meetings to discuss the structure of the federation and building of a capital fund. Some members of the group and men of the village were suspicious about the use of capital fund and did not allow the women to join the federation. Again motivators took the responsibility to convince all the members and the men folk of the village. Finally, 17 groups had come forward to be organized into a federation. Each member of the group decided to contribute a share of Rs. 600/- to the

capital fund for starting trading activities collectively. The federation was formally established in October 2002. They elected their office bearers and distributed the responsibilities among them.

## **Strengthening the federation and giving it legal status as a Co-operative**

HARC helped in designing the structure of the federation, formulating its bylaws, drafting its constitution, and developing needed systems. HARC also analyzed the groups' risk-taking ability and helped develop their business plan and marketing strategy. Regular inputs were given to the executive committee on federation management, stock keeping and account management, and in marketing and negotiation. Members were oriented on trade-related government regulations. The next step was to give the legal identity to the federation. The federation was registered as the Rawain Mahila Multipurpose Autonomous Co-operative Society Ltd. At present, the Co-operative has 213 members and a 17-member board of directors. Once a month, Co-operative members meet to discuss their plans, problems, and ways to take action. Four regular staff and 17 Co-operative directors give regular services in the production and marketing of products.

## **Procedure of task division in Co-operative**

Co-operative has divided the roles and responsibilities to its directors and other members according to the capacities of its members. The provision of task division helped not only in improvement in the quality of work but also in accomplishing the task with given time. Co-operative has formed four committees (purchasing, quality control, marketing, and processing). These committees of the Co-operative are responsible for managing and controlling different aspects of micro enterprise. The purchasing committee buys the product from its members and other women groups according to the need and demand of the market. This committee also discusses the production plan of different traditional crops with member and makes an agreement with them to ensure the procurement with them. Marketing Committee work for generating demands at local market, participate in exhibitions and fairs and open the seasonal outlet in local area during the tourist season (May to Mid July). Quality control Committee checks the quality of produce at village level and collection centers so that quality of the products can be maintained.

## **Details of the document with the Co-operative**

The Co-operative has maintained all the necessary documents for proper and smooth functioning. These documents help in maintaining the transparency in the co-operative as well as also help in strengthening internal control system. Stock register, credit register, production register, balance capital register, membership register, proceeding register are maintain under the internal control system.

## **Marketing linkages**

Once the Co-operative was formed with legal status, the most important task was to align its activities towards the achievement of its goal. The first priority was to build financial linkages to start production and trading activities. Exploring market channels for selling the products was the second most important step. With the help of HARC and market experts, the Co-operative members repaired their market strategy. Women collectives were linked with banks and had regular interface with the bankers. Financial institutions like State Bank in Naugaon and Badkot and National Bank for Agriculture & Rural Development (NABARD) helped in developing clarity among women to manage their accounts systematically. Banks also sanctioned Cash Credit Limit (CCL) for some of the women's groups. Through this, the groups could then get loans from the bank.

The Co-operative engaged in the trade of millets, grains, spices, and pulses. Using the brand name, Rawain's Nature Pure, the board of directors decides the rates of purchase and sale. Marketing linkages were built with retailers and wholesalers in some big cities of India, like Dehradun, Delhi, Chandigarh and Bangalore. Intensive efforts are made to strengthen backward and forward linkages. At present the Co-operative is dealing with more than 32 items, most of them grown the traditional way and free of chemical pesticides and fertilizers. This is the strength of the products of Ranwai Women Multipurpose Autonomous Co-operative Society Ltd.

## **System made for market management**

Rawain Women Multipurpose Autonomous Co-operative Society Ltd. had made proper arrangements for the marketing of its products. Co-operative identified some shops in local market where the products of Co-operative are placed which can be seen in separate rack in the shop provided by Co-operative. In Dehradun Co-operative has opened its own outlet from where products are distributed to more than 80 retail shops of Dehradun, Mussorie and Rishikesh. For a better system management weekly marketing format, demand & supply format, stocks checking after every 15 days, monthly marketing progress report format has been maintained. In monthly meeting Co-operative produce above said reports to the members of Co-operative and based on this the future plan is prepared for production and marketing. In this way there is much transparency in the functioning of Co-operative. Co-operative with the help of HARC participates in different exhibitions and fairs for the marketing and advertising of its products which has resulted into expansion of market linkages of co-operative.

The state government of Uttaranchal supported women's groups and their Co-operative by providing them the opportunity to participate in state, national and international trade fairs. This increased the publicity of different products of the Co-operative.

## Details of the employment given to members

The main aim of Co-operative is to improve the economic condition of its members. The co-operative generate the employment opportunities for its members during its different activities. As a result members are being benefited by the co-operative in three ways. Co-operative ensures the maximum participation of its members in grading, packing and processing activities. For this the members get a fixed amount as their wages. Co-operative, for the above said work, has given



more than Rs 1 lakh 75 thousand to its members. Co-operative buys the products from its 17 different groups. This also giving direct earnings to women. The profit earned by Co-operative is also distributed among the members. In the first profit sharing the Co-operative has distributed Rs 40 thousand among the members

## Ensuring sustainability

Right from the beginning the matter of sustainability had been addressed by the development of the Co-operative based on women's capacities and local agro-eco resources. The most important factor is the collective approach to economic development, which is based on felt needs of the women. HARC focused on building the federation instead of creating it. The vision, mission, objective and operational strategies were clearly defined and made understandable to the members from the beginning. The members made all the financial investments so they have a strong sense of ownership in the Co-operative.

## The main outcomes and impact

The establishment of the women's Co-operative is the major outcome of the whole process. The impact of this can be seen from a comparison of women's situation before and after the Co-operative came into being.

- ▶ Due to the emergence of women's collectives at the village level, women have gained confidence, started participating in the village meetings and articulating their concerns.
- ▶ Cooperative is able to provide the employment to its members through income generation activities. Within 9 months members of society got the employment of Rs 1 lakh 75 thousand this has increased women access to direct cash.
- ▶ As cooperative is trading by products of traditional crops, the production of these crops is increasing in the area and women are getting better price for traditional crops.
- ▶ Through the technical inputs given to the cooperative now the efficiency of women has been increased in activities like processing, packing and grading of product.

- ▶ Being a member of cooperative the social expectance of women has been increased at family as well as society level. It is clearly visible as the male members are encouraging them to participate in the activities of cooperative.
- ▶ The sense of ownership is increased among women by putting their share in the cooperative. It is visible as women are participating in the production and marketing activities.
- ▶ As members of the cooperative, many of the women have been elected by the villagers as the representatives of the Panchayat.

The Rawain Women Multipurpose Autonomous Co-operative Society Ltd is the only women's federation engaged in trading activities in the state of Uttranchal. It has become an inspiration for other women's groups within and outside the state. Now a lot of women's groups formed under development projects of the Uttranchal government are looking into this model to learn the process.