

Uttarakhand Mahila Parishad

(Uttarakhand Women's Federation)



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SUMMARY

This study documents the experiences of the Uttarakhand Mahila Parishad (Uttarakhand Women's Federation), a network of around 450 women's groups (Whole Village groups or WVGs), spread over villages in seven districts of Uttarakhand. The WVGs are a part of the larger network under the umbrella of Uttarakhand Seva Nidhi Paryavaran Shikshan Sansthan (Uttarakhand Environment Education Centre, USNPSS), based in Almora which has been working in the hill villages of Uttarakhand since 1987 in partnership with community based organisations (CBOs) in different regions of the state.

The data was collected over a period of four months from May 2009-August 2009. Focus group discussions were conducted with women's groups in fourteen villages along with semi-structured interviews with women individually as well as CBO workers in the villages. Interviews were also conducted over two days at a state level meeting in Almora where around 50 women from different regions in the state participated.

Through narratives collected from villages and CBO workers, the study reflects on experiences over two decades of formation and functioning of the women's groups at the village level, the process of organising, interactions in the network –between women from different villages, regions, CBO workers and USNPSS. It charts the above in the context of the organisational history and vision of USNPSS and highlights some of the tensions, challenges and opportunities in the process of organising. The narratives also articulate some of the larger socio-economic changes that have occurred in the villages and the role of the women's groups in moulding some of these changes.

Common strands and recurrent themes have been identified across narratives from different villages to trace the changes and the path of the WVGs over a span of nearly two decades. This framework includes formative periods, challenges in organising as a group overcoming both resistance from the village community and personal inhibitions, their activities as a group in the sphere of natural resource management, organisation and management of other common resources in the village, engaging with state institutions to demand service delivery and accountability and a recent foray into electoral politics at the *panchayat* level and active engagement with elected representatives. Through the course of this process, women have negotiated social norms, challenged malpractices, habits leading to alcohol abuse and through a series of measures ensured women's presence and participation in the public domain.

The broad trajectory that has emerged through accounts from several villages shows that the agenda of the women's groups was predominantly occupied by issues of maintenance and running of the *balwadi*, children's education and natural resource management in the initial years, and then gradually expanded to include active engagement with state institutions- demanding accountability and participation in formal governance institutions-in *gram sabha* and *panchayat* activities. However, this trajectory is not linear and discussions with women's groups at the village level have been included to illustrate the varying dynamics at the village level and regionally.

Groups at the village level have their own unique trajectories of development determined by the specific social, economic and political milieu of the village, nature of CBO interactions and leadership emerging within the village. While working within a common and related framework, women have worked out particular strategies and over the years have identified their own needs and agendas at the village level. Some groups are as old as 20 years while others were formed in the past 5-10 years. The CBOs also comprise a wide spectrum of organisations ranging from one or two persons to those with formal organisational set-ups; organisations with long histories of working in the area and those which are only a few years old.

Women in most instances have a sense of being part of a state-wide or at least regional network and not just members of an isolated village level group. For many of them this is because of a direct experience of being part of trainings/ meetings at USNPSS in Almora or attending regional meetings periodically with the local CBO and women from other villages in the region. Building spaces for discussion and deliberative dialogue through trainings, regional meetings and village level meetings is one of the central strategies in the formation and sustenance of the network. Sharing experiences with women from other villages directly and through CBO workers is an intrinsic part of the approach to organising a collective. Expanding aspirations of women and what is achievable and the act of learning how to work collectively while negotiating conflict and social and economic differences is the core of what is defined as 'empowerment' in this instance. An analysis of the strategies as well as inadvertent consequences and women's own narratives –emphasises the relational and collective nature of 'empowerment', negotiating and learning to work as a group as well as building their own confidence in the process. There is a fine balancing act of working with the USNPSS's overarching vision of ecological sustainability while encouraging active participation of women, the CBOs and the wider village community. In the absence of material incentives, 'participation' is not simply a desirable objective but the premise of the endeavour itself. Conflicts arise at several levels within the village community, the CBO and USNPSS in practices and visions rendering the process of change time consuming but engagement with conflicts also leads to sustainable changes arrived at organically.

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Chapter I

Introduction



The Uttarakhand Mahila Parishad (UMP or the Uttarakhand Women's Federation) is a network of around 450 women's groups spread over seven districts of Uttarakhand. The groups consist of all the women in a village- 'Whole Village Groups (WVGs) (also referred to as 'Mahila Sangathans'/'Sangathans' or 'Mahila Mangal Dal' locally). The UMP is a part of the larger network under the umbrella of Uttarakhand Seva Nidhi Paryavaran Shikshan Sansthan (Uttarakhand Environment Education Centre) (USNPSS henceforth and also referred to as Seva Nidhi¹), based in Almora, which has been working in the hill villages of Uttarakhand since 1987 along with community based organisations in different regions.

The process of formation for some of the groups began in the late 1980s and early 1990s with the opening of the *balwadi* (pre-primary centres) by USNPSS, whereas in other villages they have been formed more recently. There are intermediary regional federations, constituted of women's groups in villages in a particular region and work with a particular Community Based Organisation (CBO). The women's groups are not isolated entities but in constant interaction with each other as a part of the network.

This study attempts to capture the changes that have occurred within and among communities in the hill villages over the last two decades with the women at the centre of the process. Shifting social norms particularly gendered norms; active political participation and active engagement with state institutions, movement towards ecological sustainability are some of the tangible changes that are becoming visible.

Through the experiences of the women's groups and the process of organising and mobilising by CBOs and USNPSS over a span of two decades, this study reflects on the notion of 'empowerment' (a buzzword in the discourse and practice of participatory development and gender) that has here occurred as a collective process. Empowerment is conceptualised as an evolving process, as opposed to being defined as a measure of performance on certain indicators such as literacy level, participation in political governance institutions or ownership and control over economic assets.

The study also seeks to highlight the role of external intervention in this process, drawing on the strategies and modalities from this particular experience, as the critique that has emerged of participatory development practice has largely centered on this issue. It also delineates the strategies used in organising women, to examine the challenges and dilemmas in the process of group formation and evolution, which is not always linear or uniform, and varies across regions and from village to village.

The vision of change is one that is constituted through a collaborative process; hence 'external intervention' here refers to strategies adopted to initiate and sustain this process by CBO workers and USNPSS, who are mostly locals from the region. It also refers to ideas that emanate from wider discourses, particularly in the case of gender, and the modalities through which they are infused and subsequently negotiated with and redefined.

Structure of the Study



Chapter I describes the methodology for this study followed by a brief socio-economic profile of the state of Uttarakhand. The women's groups are placed in the context of the organisational history of USNPSS and the network of CBOs. It charts the moorings and guiding principles of the organisation which are critical to understanding the essence of the women's collectives and their trajectories. The other initiatives of USNPSS are briefly described, in so far as they are relevant to understanding the vision and philosophy of the organisation. Interactions between various levels of the network, i.e., USNPSS, the CBOs and the women's groups at the village level, highlight the dynamic, organic and complex nature of 'external intervention' in this instance.

Chapter II draws on interviews and discussions with women's groups in villages in Kumaon and Garhwal exploring process of formation of groups; their experiences of organising and determining agendas; working in different spheres such as natural resource management; accessing government services; political participation; bringing about changes in gender relations. It captures the challenges in the process of organisation and the evolution of groups over the years and highlights the unique aspects of the functioning of groups in different villages. Individual profiles of some women, who have emerged as leaders within their communities bring forth their individual struggles as well as

capture strategies for organising and conflict resolution within communities.

Chapter III briefly comments on the functioning of the groups, modalities of functioning of the USNPSS network and their strategies in the backdrop of contemporary debates on participatory development, gender and women's empowerment. It will also identify the implications of changing socio-economic and political environment for future strategies, identifying pressures for change of various kinds, along with pressures to remain the same.



Methodology

A mix of qualitative methods has been used for this study. These include:

- Discussions with USNPSS staff at Almora
- Review of data collected by USNPSS, and of existing documents and reports
- Visits to selected villages and focus group discussions with members of women's groups
- Observation of women's group meetings – village and regional level
- Interviews with key informants – *adhyakshas* (presidents of women's groups), *margadarshika* (supervisors of *balwadis*), CBO workers

The data was collected over a period of four months from May 2009-August 2009.

Focus group discussions were conducted with women's groups in fourteen villages. Eight of them are in Almora district; one in Bageshwar district; and one in Pithoragarh district in Kuamoon region and three in Chamoli district in Garhwal. One meeting each in Almora, Chamoli and Pithoragarh was a regional meeting and included women from neighbouring villages. Regionally, the villages covered fall in the working area of five CBOs. The meetings with the women's groups were held in the *balwadi bhavan*, *panchayat bhavan* and at times someone's house or primary school. Semi-structured interviews were also conducted with women individually as well as CBO workers in the villages. Interviews were also conducted over two days at a state level meeting in Almora where around 50 women from different regions in the state participated.

Interviews and discussions have been open-ended and respondents have introduced themes not initially envisaged. Apart from the focus group discussion for the purpose of the study, method of participant observation was used, particularly to observe interaction between USNPSS and CBO workers and the women's groups.

The villages were selected in consultation with the staff at USNPSS and regional CBOs. Travelling in the hills is time-consuming and difficult due to the geographical terrain; hence time constraints and accessibility were a significant factor in the selection of regions and villages. The sample includes villages which were located close to the road, as well as remote villages at a distance of several kilometres from the nearest road, sometimes requiring a steep uphill climb. It includes single-caste and multi-caste villages. The number of households in the villages range from 15-200. The groups in some villages are 15-25 years old and in others have formed as recently as one-two years ago. Some

villages have also seen the breaking up and reformation of WVGs over the decades. Not all regions, districts and CBOs that fall under the network have been covered in this study.

In the analysis of the data, common strands have been identified from the focus group discussions and interviews in the 14 villages, to organise the experiences of the WVGs in thematic categories in chapter two. Excerpts from these discussions have been used verbatim to illustrate these themes and changes that have occurred, but also to highlight the differences in processes across villages. A few life histories have been included to highlight personal transformations as the group discussions which primarily form the core of the data emphasise collective experiences. The life histories and accounts of group discussion are also included to highlight the non-linear nature of the process of change.

Socio-Economic Profile of Uttarakhand



Uttarakhand, located in the north of India is bound by China in the north and Nepal in the east. Uttarakhand State was carved out of the state of Uttar Pradesh on November 9, 2000. Prior to 2000, the term 'Uttarakhand' referred to the hill districts of Uttar Pradesh. After the formation of the new state, Uttarakhand includes the hill districts but also some plains areas as well. For this reason, descriptions of

'Uttarakhand' prior to 2000 are not directly applicable to the newly formed state.

It is divided into two broad regions-Garhwal and Kumaon. There are 13 districts, namely, Chamoli, Pauri, Tehri, Uttarkashi, Dehradun, Haridwar and Rudraprayag in the Garhwal region and Nainital, Almora, Pithoragarh, Udham Singh Nagar, Champawat and Bageshwar in the Kumaon region. Of these 13 districts, four districts (Nainital, Haridwar, Dehradun and Udham Singh Nagar) have large areas in the plains, whereas the other nine districts comprise the hill region of the state. The work of the USNPSS network is concentrated in the hill region of the state and the villages covered in this study are in Chamoli, Almora, Pithoragarh and Bageshwar districts. As per the 2001 Census of India, the total population is about 8.5 million with women accounting for about 49% of the total population.



According to NFHS 3² (2005-2006), more than one-fourth (28%) of Uttarakhand's households are in urban areas, and the remaining (72%) are in rural areas. On average, households in Uttarakhand are comprised of five members. The vast majority of households in Uttarakhand have household heads who are Hindu (87%). Seven percent have Muslim household heads and 5 percent have Sikh household heads. All other religions account for less than 1 percent of household heads. Twenty-one percent of households belong to a scheduled caste, 3 percent

belong to a scheduled tribe, and 15 percent belong to other backward classes (OBC). Sixty-two percent of Uttarakhand's households do not belong to scheduled castes, scheduled tribes, or other backward classes. 24.4 % of the households' possess a BPL card (4.7 in urban areas and 32.1 in rural areas).



Ninety-four percent of primary-school age children (6-10 years) attend school (89% in urban areas and 95% in rural areas). School attendance drops to 86 percent for children age 11-14 years and is only 55 percent for children age 15-17 years. Gender disparity in education is evident in the school age population, with 78 percent of girls in the age group 6-17 years attending school, compared with 86 percent of boys in the same age group. Among children age 6-10 years, there is very little gender disparity in school attendance between boys and girls. Thirty-three percent of women and 12 percent of men age 15-49 have never attended school.

The median age at first marriage among women age 25-49 in Uttarakhand is 18 years. Almost one-quarter (23%) of women age 20-24 years got married before the legal minimum age of 18 and 21 percent of men age 25-29 years got married before the legal minimum age of 21. The overall sex ratio in the state is 996 (Urban: 940; Rural: 1018).

The cropping pattern of the hill districts is mainly based on traditional agriculture. In almost all the

hill districts, rice, wheat, *mandwa*, and *sanwa* remain the main crops with the maximum area under cultivation. Availability of pasture and grazing land is crucial for better fodder availability for livestock in these districts. In rural areas, 25.6% households own irrigated land; 36.8% own non-irrigated land; 9.1 % own both irrigated and non-irrigated land and 28.5% own no agricultural land. (NFHS 3)

The land holdings are small and fragmented, and irrigation facilities limited. All the hill districts have subsistence farming as their main economic activity. The hill region districts are less developed in terms of infrastructure, i.e., electricity, roads and irrigation. Eighty percent of households (95% of urban households and 74% of rural households) have electricity, up from 53 percent at the time of NFHS-2. Eighty-seven percent of households use an improved source of drinking water (99% of urban households and 83% of rural households), but only 44 percent have water piped into their dwelling, yard, or plot. 74.8% of the households use wood as cooking fuel in the rural areas. (NFHS 3)

Time to obtain drinking water (round trip)	Urban (%)	Rural (%)	Total
Water on premises	88.6	48.2	59.6
Less than 30 minutes	8.9	33.8	26.8
Thirty minutes or longer	2.3	18.0	13.6

Source: NFHS 3

Subsistence livelihood, migration and a remittance economy operate in the hill districts. Women's participation in the rural economy is significant. In Uttarakhand, young men generally migrate to the plains in search of employment, whereas women are left behind to cultivate the land and take care of the children and the older generation. (Sekhar, 2007) Women are also

closely connected with forests, because the responsibility of collecting wood for fuel and fodder, looking after cattle and fetching water rests with them.



Majority of women in rural areas of Uttarakhand are engaged in agricultural work primarily as cultivators and marginally as agricultural labourers. The rural-urban disparity in engagement in economic activities is evident. Female work participation rate is higher in rural than that of urban areas. Engagement of more than 80% of rural women in agricultural work becomes a basis of intra-state disparities in engagements in economic activities among women themselves because the agricultural work in the lowlands is different from the hills. Heavy work burden and concentration of women in agricultural work is caused by the sexual division of labour and male out-migration. Agricultural work comprises diverse activities including making compost for fields, animal care, provision of water for cultivation besides ploughing the fields, sowing, harvesting and cleaning of grains

and vegetables. Traditionally, all agricultural work except ploughing was done by women. However, increasingly women are taking up ploughing also, especially in female headed households, single-women homes and among nuclear families. According to NFHS 3, one in every six households (16%) is headed by a woman.



The Organisational Network

Beginnings of Uttarakhand Seva Nidhi Paryavaran Shikshan Sansthan (USNPSS)

USNPSS started working in the hills of Uttarakhand in the mid 1980s as a nodal organization enabling regional community based organisations (henceforth CBOs) and in some cases individuals initially to start, continue or expand working in their specific regions, the overarching theme being that of environment education interpreted in the broadest sense possible. The founding philosophy drew on an understanding of the link between environmental degradation and livelihood sustainability and the 1986 National Policy on Education which stressed Environmental Education. It emphasised the notion that providing educational inputs for a change in people's understanding was a more sustainable approach as opposed to just mobilising people to carry out specific activities³. There were no rigid agendas or pre-conceived

objectives, and the idea was to draw on the everyday lived experience of village communities to identify their needs and problems, to involve and engage the village community –“to encourage a fragile idea of creating a social movement to improve education, health, socio-economic and environmental relations in the hills” (Annual Report 2006-07: 2).

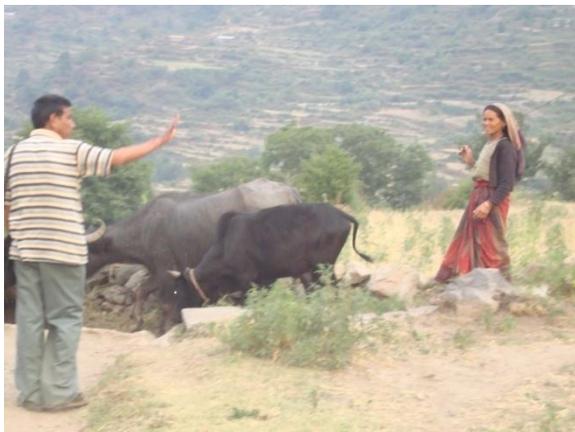
“Change was the only vision we had, as there was dissatisfaction with the status –quo and fortunately we had the freedom to evolve on our own terms.”

Dr Lalit Pande, Director, USNPSS at a Workshop on Community Learning held at Almora 22-23 May 2009

Small groups which were carrying out disparate activities around the state in remote villages like running a school, nursery, and awareness building activities like *Padyatras* were supported with minimal amount of funds. “They were farmers, teachers, women cultivators, community leaders etc. some of them were followers of Mahatma Gandhi whilst others, disillusioned by the trends of development in the hills had turned to activism. Some of them believed in a radical approach to development and were ready to start ‘revolution’ in the villages.” (Annual Report 2006-07) Individuals and informal groups, many of whom were natives from the region, were familiar with its social, political and economic fabric. Transparency, accompanied by minimal paperwork and simple accounting procedures made USNPSS accessible. These organic relationships with the community and the process of generating collaborative ideas and activities were fundamental to the initiative.

A flexible model of functioning became intrinsic to the organisational modus operandi. The CBOs are conduits and managers of the programmes in different districts and regions but also partners who are regularly consulted and autonomous

organisational entities. Over the years, some groups have registered themselves and many have expanded the range of their activities. Between 1987 and 2006, USNPSS, as a nodal agency of the Ministry of Human Resource and Development, Department of Education helped around 281 CBOs/ NGOs. The term 'CBO' (community based organisations) encompasses a range of set-ups, from one or two persons to those with formal organisational set-ups; organisations with long histories of working in the area and those which are only a few years old. The amounts given and time period varied. This enabled some organisations to get a toehold and to carry on independently. Many now have larger budgets than the USNPSS. There were some NGOs where the main functionary was not a local person, but wanted to work in Uttarakhand. Collaboration with some CBOs did not work out because of fundamental differences over modes of working or availability of sufficient funding. Others failed to make an impact. There are some organisations that have been associated with USNPSS through the entire period, even if they have accessed funds from other sources. While bringing about change is a shared ideology, for the association to continue there needs to be agreement on preferred strategies as well.



Since 2006, the number of organisations associated with USNPSS has declined and no new ones are being added, largely due to a reduction in the funding available. Further, increasingly there is more funding available for NGOs from

government and multilateral agencies like the World Bank than there was in the 1980s/ 90s. This has altered the milieu substantially from when the organisation started working, particularly availability of large amounts of project funds, has generated new avenues of employment for local boys and girls. There are currently 20 CBOs working in different districts in the state, through which the funds get channelled for the *balwadi* programme and for the WVG activities.



Programme Initiatives⁴

Environmental education was seen as a way of bridging the gap between formal institutions – schools, government agencies - and informal institutions, communities and network of NGOs. All of the various programmes are interlinked through the idea of collective learning. USNPSS developed a curriculum for environment education and was responsible for the first ever textbooks on the subject introduced into regular school curriculum. It was based on extensive feedback, collaboration and participation of teachers, students, education department officials and rural communities through a series of workshops and interaction. The state government made it a part of the regular school curriculum in 2000-2001. Training was also provided to DIET (District Institute of Educational Training) master trainers who train teachers in state run schools. The *balwadi* (pre-school centres) programme, a

community based educational programme for young children (2-6 years) in the hill villages, connected the organisation with people in the villages in the most direct and concrete ways. The programme expanded from two *balwadis* in 1987 to 355 *balwadis* in 2001 run by 28 local groups spread in Kumaun and Garhwal. However, since 2001, the *balwadi* has been shut down in many villages in an attempt to avoid duplication, as state run *anganwadi* centers are being opened under the Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS)⁵. Currently there are 190 *balwadi* centres, spread over seven hill districts.

At its inception, the *balwadi* catered to educational needs of children in remote villages where even primary schools did not exist. The learning at the *balwadi* is based on an innovative pedagogical framework which promoted discussion and thinking; and learning through play. It also lays down the foundation of environmental concepts and orients children towards their environment from an early age.

The *balwadis* have over the years become critical institutions in the village which are managed by the CBO and the *shikshika* (teacher) but more significantly the village community and particularly the women are responsible for their efficient everyday functioning. The *balwadi* in the villages is only set up if a need is identified by the people in the village and the CBO. From providing space, to construction of the *balwadi bhavan* the community takes the initiative and is supported by the CBO and USNPSS. They have been able to function successfully in many villages because of the efforts and involvement of the women.

The *balwadi* as a space and an institution has been critical in the coming together of the women's groups in several villages as will be explored later. Also the *balwadi shikshika*, the *margdarshika*⁶ have often been instrumental in organising women. The CBO workers have established

rapport and relationships with the village community revolving around the functioning of the *balwadi*. The 'spontaneous' formation of women's groups has been a culmination of all these factors over the years.

Other recent initiatives are the *Sandhya Kendras* and the formation of *Kishor/ Kishori sangthans* (adolescent boys and girls groups) which are currently in nascent stages. With the opening of *anganwadis* in villages and the presence of primary school within easy reach these initiatives are a logical progression in the collective learning framework.

Sandhya Kendras (Eco-evening centres) are designed to meet the needs of school going children (6-11 years) which are not catered to in the current education system and these gaps are only heightened in rural areas. They provide a space for children to learn about issues relevant to their lives. Children go outdoors to observe and learn more about their surrounding environment. They undertake creative activities like writing essays, drawing and painting. The focus is on participation and enjoyment with the aim of building on a child's knowledge and his/her abilities through contextualized place based learning.



Sandhya Kendra, Almora District

To build on the work done by women's groups over the years, USNPSS is encouraging adolescents to form groups, particularly girls

with a view to increasing their capabilities and knowledge about their development and health issues, and discussing issues of education and livelihood. Currently in some villages they take responsibility of organising *balmelas*⁷, women's meetings, keeping the villages clean, organising plays on local problems etc. Issues of reproductive health, nutrition, education and self-development are emphasised in work related to adolescent girls. They are also encouraged to participate in the activities of the women's groups.

There was always a special focus on education of girls. *Balwadis* and *sandhya kendras* provided opportunities to girls to pursue their education and also learn and understand their environment and address practical problems. Majority of the children attending the *balwadi* are girls. In the early years, *shikshikas* had to go to houses in the village and convince parents to educate their girls. Also the *balwadi shikshikas* are usually young unmarried girls who are selected by the CBO in consultation with the women in the village and belong to neighbouring villages. While the *balwadi shikshika's* main work was looking after children and running the *balwadi*, they were also trained to be community organisers. The trainings also provided opportunities for girls for further education and exposure. For instance, imparting health education, particularly on reproductive health is an integral part of training. For many of the girls, the trip to Almora for the training is their first time outside the village.



Balwadi, Almora District

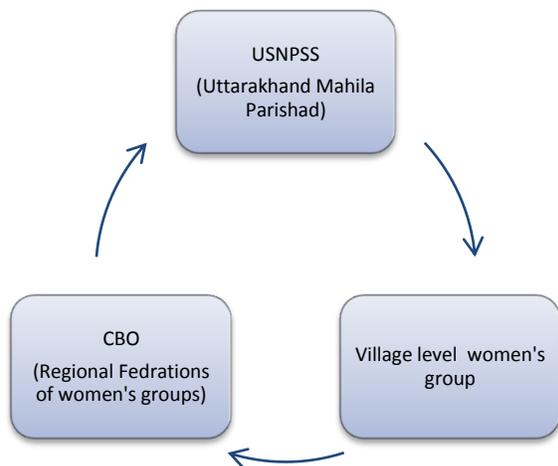
It is noteworthy that all the programme initiatives have evolved over the years as a consequence of needs that have been identified or come up in the course of interaction within the community which includes the network of CBOs and the village community. For all of the above initiatives at the village level, it is only when people in the village express a desire that assistance is provided to facilitate the process of starting a *balwadi*, a *Sandhya Kendra* or an adolescent group. Since monetary support is minimal, it is critical that the community takes responsibility for implementing and sustaining an initiative.

The character and functioning of the organisation is to large extent determined by its beginnings which set an overarching framework of environment education and excluded the promotion of income generation projects. The flexibility of the framework allowed for CBOs with different modes of functioning to connect with each other while dealing with regional specificities and also initiatives to be shaped by the context of every village. Various initiatives are not segmented projects but have evolved organically and build on the relationships within the village community. The *balwadi* is the space, around which women's groups evolved and function, education of girls was emphasised in the *balwadi* as well as through the training of young girls who were trained to be *shikshikas*. (Nanda, 2001) The experiences of women's groups over several years has created the context and enabled the emergence of *kishori sangathans* (*adolescent girls' groups*). These linkages have developed because of a long term commitment and relationships build over the years.

The village community, CBOs and the USNPSS form a network that collectively has been working towards bringing about change. Within the village, the women have been the critical actors in this process. Before exploring the work of the women's groups, it is important to understand the various strands of this network

and how they work to facilitate the process. The next section details the organisational structure, focusing on the CBOS.

The Network of Community Based Organisations (CBOs)



The idea of a network best describes the organisational set-up which involves USNPSS at the helm as a facilitator laying out the guiding principles, the CBOs who work with the community on an everyday basis based on the guiding principles but also modifying them, according to regional specificities and undertaking a process of negotiation in their interaction with the community. The community formed by the people in the villages, primarily women who are active participants in the process of bringing about changes according to their felt needs are supported through the network. They also engage in accepting and at times rejecting the ideas that are introduced from the outside. This process of negotiation and modification through interaction and dialogue between the three levels creates an iterative loop⁸. The role of USNPSS as the umbrella body apart from funding the various initiatives through CBOs is also to facilitate the flow of information and dialogue through trainings held at Almora as well as regional meetings of the women's groups and interaction

between different CBOS working across the state. The iterative process has enabled a learning curve that can be seen at work in the development of the initiatives supported by USNPSS over the years. Starting with environment education and supporting the *balwadi* programme, gradually led to the formation of women's groups, and other programme initiative as mentioned above. This process is also visible in the working of the women's groups and their engagement with different issues which will be explored later.

The CBO workers are responsible for everyday level interaction with the village and the community. For many of the women in the villages, who have not yet been to Almora for trainings or attended regional meetings, CBO worker is the representative of the outside impetus for change. They are aware of the specificities of every village, have build relationships with people over the years and are usually locals from the area. In villages where the CBO has been working for a long time, the CBO worker is usually the *margdarshika* associated with the *balwadi*.



The CBO plays a crucial role in two ways, firstly the implementation of what are termed as '*rachnatmak karya*', literally meaning creative activities. These involve activities like construction of toilets or planting nurseries which require funding and technical support, which comes from USNPSS but is managed and

implemented by the CBO worker in conjunction with the women's group in a village. 'Rachnatmak karya' is a Gandhian term which is used by people in the villages and CBO workers to distinguish constructive tangible activities from other work which includes a gamut of intangibles like exchange of information and ideas at meetings, protest or campaigns against alcoholism, malfunctioning of state functionaries like school teachers etc. This distinction will become clearer in the next chapter where activities of women's groups will be explored in detail. However, these two aspects constantly feed into each other.



Following are the profiles of some of these CBOs⁹ which is crucial to understanding the working of and nature of women's groups in the villages which have been covered in the course of the fieldwork.

Uttarakhand Shiv Shakti Ushma Chamoligarh working in Danya region, Almora district is affiliated to the Lakshmi Ashram, Kausani and is one of the oldest CBOs working in the area and has been associated with USNPSS since its inception in the mid 1980s. Lakshmi Ashram, Kausani provided support and guidance in the initial stages of conceptualisation of the *balwadi* programme to USNPSS. The Ashram started working in Danya in 1982, running *balwadis* in five villages. Its association with USNPSS began five years later and with support

from them the *balwadi* expanded to about 45 villages in the area. At present they work in 26 villages in Danya, out of which 15 have operational *balwadis*. Women's groups function in all these villages and the process of forming *kishori sangathans* has been recently initiated in a few of them. Two of the core workers at USNPSS responsible for managing and running the *balwadi* programme started as *balwadi shikshikas* and then later as *margdarshikas* with this CBO. It is one of the few CBOs run entirely by women. This region also has some of the oldest women's groups (20-25 years old).

Pushpa Devi, Sanstha Sachiv (CBO In-charge), Uttarakhand Shiv Shakti Ushma, Chamoligarh, Danya

I came to Kausani to study in 1969, as a young girl, and came in contact with the Lakshmi Ashram where I completed inter high school while doing some work for them. After completing my education, I started working with the Ashram, and they sent me to Danya region. I was in-charge of running the Khadi centre and also worked as a margdarshika for the balwadis in the area. In those days people in the villages took pride in the balwadi shikshikas, because girls' coming out of their houses and being involved with social work was unheard of. They also took an active interest and looked after the running of the balwadi with minimal supervision from the sanstha I remember the first training that was held for balwadi shikshikas for 10 days in Kausani. When I approached the parents they refused to send their girls for 10 days. They said you cannot just leave them and come back, we will only send them if you stay there with them for 10 days. I told them, "look I am also a young girl and I have come from my village to live in your village which was unknown to me. All of you have helped me and supported me; similarly there will be people in Kausani to help your girls". Finally they relented. After the first batch of girls came back safe and sound, people were more willing and trustful. At that time, two girls worked in one balwadi, one of them as a helper. This also assured the parents to some extent. Parents of these girls who became balwadi

shikshikas were happy that there girls were earning Rs100-150; at least they could buy their own clothes, soap –powder etc. Over the years, things are changing gradually, girls in the villages have started studying more-those who studied till class five went up to class 8, now many of them are studying up to inter-college.

Now that balwadis are closing gradually, we work primarily with the mahila sangathans. Since working with the women is about creating awareness it requires very little money.

We have done a lot of rachnatmak karya in this area through support from Seva Nidhi as well as other sources. This includes watershed programmes; digging chal khals; helping people build toilets although the support for that has reduced in last 2-3years. Nearly 150-200 toilets have been built in the villages in this area. We provide only partial cost, mere Rs 1000 as an incentive, the remaining amount people have to invest on their own. They do it only if they realise the need for constructing them.

We do not take certain kinds of support if it is opposed to our ideological principle for instance the idea of Self Help Groups (SHG) -there have been instances when other NGOs have misled people by going into villages and saying they were associated with us. There are several organisations in this region now promoting SHGs but they just collect women to deposit money and that is all. There is nothing more to them.

Jai Nanda Devi Swarojgar Shikshan Sansthan (JANDESH) was formed in 1996 and started working with the support of USNPSS. Starting as a small set-up, it has over the years grown into a formal structure with support from various funding agencies and work on several projects simultaneously including livelihood and income generation activities, environment education, formation of adolescent groups, *panchayati raj* and rights based training amongst others. The CBO works in 60 villages of Joshimath and Dasholi blocks of Chamoli district, Garhwal. At present, they get very limited

support from USNPSS and those activities are a very small component of Jandesh's work. However they are keen to be associated with USNPSS and the network particularly through participation of the women in the trainings and regional meetings of the WVGs.

Lakshman Negi, Founder and In-charge, Jandesh

Women's vision and exposure is still limited in the villages, particularly those which are geographically remote. If you and I go and tell them something, that's news for them that they would probably accept unquestioningly. Television is widely available now in the villages, but not Doordarshan, only films and songs mostly DVDs and CDs so what sources of information from the outside world do they have? Gender equity is a difficult goal to achieve. Notions such as 'only husband will go for gram sabha open meetings'; 'women will go to collect grass, fodder, fuel, look after cattle etc' are deeply embedded. If a woman's husband beats her up and we bring it up in a village meeting the next day, she will herself oppose us and how can you say such things to my husband.

People in the villages here need more guidance and support, even after all these years of work. For instance on the issue of participation in Panchayats, one or two women may become gram pradhans but they need sustained input on what next and what else they can do in the future. We hold Panchayat trainings where issues such as - what are open meetings, how to prepare proposals; how to put up questions on what is happening with existing schemes, are discussed.

There is need for regular staff that can work in the villages and also need for more training and guidance for CBO workers. Documentation of work for dissemination and monitoring mechanisms need to be strengthened. For instance one of the funding agencies who provide us with substantial amount of monetary assistance, make four visits in a year to assess the work we are doing. I believe that the ideal division of funds would be 60% spending on rachnatmak karya

(constructive activities such as plantation of nurseries, sanitation, *chal khals* etc); while 20% should be directed towards training activities; and 20% on administration costs.

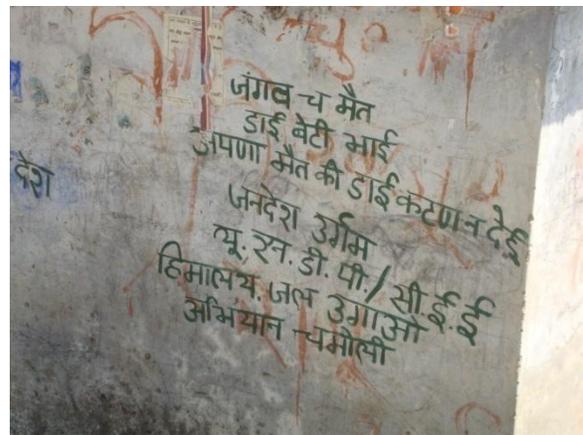
Some people in the villages criticise our work, some even say that we are corrupt and making money. But according to me even if they are criticising our work in the villages that is a form of empowerment because it indicates that they have learnt to question and not accept everything blindfolded.

The origins of some of the women's groups in Chamoli district, in Garhwal can be traced to the Chipko movement in the mid 1970s. Following the Chipko Andolan¹⁰, many of the defunct *mahila mandals* (government sponsored village and district level women's organisations) were revitalised (Kumar, 1993: 147).¹¹



Society for Environmental Education and Rural development (SEED) was formed in 1992 with the aim of working towards environment education and women's empowerment. Started by Mohan Kandpal, a school teacher from the region, environment education was a strong focus and it included issues of village sanitation, activities like water conservation, afforestation, building nurseries which are funded by USNPSS. SEED works in 62 villages in Dwarahat region in Almora district.

Being closer geographically, there is more sustained interaction with USNPSS. The regional federation of women's groups-*Mahila Ekta Parishad* is very active. As a result the CBOs role in this instance is only that of guidance and the Parishad operates more or less autonomously. A more apt description would be that the distinction between the CBO and the Parishad has over the year been blurred primarily due to emergence of strong women leaders from the villages. However, this has been a gradual process. In the initial years when the meetings were organised, only 8-10 women came. But an attempt was made from the beginning to give women significant roles and responsibilities in shaping and implementing the agenda of the organisation, and the activities and issues they wanted to engage with.



RISE and **SHAPE** are two of the newer CBOs working in about 10 villages in Seraghat, Pithoragarh District and Karnaprayag, Chamoli District respectively. They work primarily with USNPSS support. SHAPE is a relatively new CBO working since 7-8 years in this area in 10 villages and is the only NGO working in that area which is a rarity. It has two staff members including the founder. Women's groups are functioning in 10 villages, five of which also have *balwadis*. *Balwadis* were shut down in a few other villages after *Anganwadis* were opened by the government. These CBOs are still in the process of establishing rapport in the villages and the women's groups are undergoing a process of

consolidation, hence there are several instances of disintegration and reformation. Anti-alcohol protests by women are often the starting point of group formation. Also, getting to know about women's groups in other areas and their various activities during trainings or regional meetings, or shared by CBO workers have a significant demonstration effect.

Sri Pitamber Gahtodi, CBO in-charge, Pati Block, Champawat, Paryavaran Sanrakshan Samiti

We started working with Seva Nidhi in 1994, initially running balwadis in 17 villages, and then gradually started working towards the formation of the mahila sangathans. I came to Seva Nidhi with no concrete proposal but just the will to do social work. After a long discussion, a small beginning was made with support for plantation activity. These days one has to write fancy proposals in English to get aid from funding agencies which people like me cannot do.

Our first initiative was the plantation of a nursery and then we created a forest from scratch in one area. We used the example of this forest in other villages to approach people and convince them of the benefits of collective work, and of our intentions to work with them and improve their quality of life.

In those days people did not let their girls out of the houses at all, we made the first beginnings by taking girls for training as shikshikas. I believe that change begins at home, my elder brother refused to let my niece come to Almora. I then asked him to come along. He went to Almora, stayed for two days and realised that there were adequate arrangements, there were other girls and it was a safe environment so then he went back home leaving her here. We used this strategy with parents who were reluctant, encouraging them to visit Seva Nidhi and see what their girls were doing. Till date, nearly 300 girls have come for training from our area. These girls also become harbingers of change in the villages where they get married.

Our area, four blocks in Champawat district, is a staunchly male-dominated society. The only reason I have been able to work there, particularly with women, is because I have established relationships with people and they trust me completely. I am a local, was born and grew up in this area, and also practiced some jhaad phoonk (tantra vidya) and therefore people know me because of that as well. The relationships are personal, built in the villages over a period of nearly 20 years. I help people with all kinds of odd jobs - filling out their application for pension at the Block office, taking someone to the hospital when they are ill etc. I am a man and yet the women come to me if they have a problem because there is trust. The most important thing is to go and establish a rapport in the village, find out what their problems are, build relationships and help them out in whatever way you can.

Sangathans have formed, some have broken up or been inactive as well. Initially in a village only some women come for meetings, then gradually others start feeling left out and decide to come as well. In the first instance we do not go and say we have come to form a sangathan, otherwise they expect a yojana (scheme), we just gather women and talk to them about their problems. The closing down of balwadis in recent years has to some extent affected the sangathans because the number of karyakartas (workers) we can employ has decreased and the remaining ones are able to visit the villages less frequently. And the sangathans at least in the initial years and even after that do need constant reinforcement.

The above profiles highlight differences in the modality of functioning of different CBOs and illustrate a diverse spectrum. Both SEED and Jandesh, for instance, work in about 60 villages in their respective areas and began their association with USNPSS around the same time but have developed very different styles of functioning over the years. At present, Jandesh has a set of salaried staff allocated to work in certain number of village to carry out various activities funded by different agencies. It has adopted the 'project based' model and the formal procedures of

monitoring and documentation which are requisites for working with most donor agencies, but also continues its association with USNPSS. SEED on the other end is a more fluid organisation, where the leaders of the women's groups have a primary role. There are no program areas determined by funding agencies but women have engaged with issues and concerns that have come up spontaneously over the years, with guidance from the CBO in-charge, who is a school teacher from the area. The WVGs in this area are some of the most active ones in the state. The boundaries between the CBO and the regional federation in this instance are increasingly getting blurred.



Gandhian institutions¹² associated with the USNPSS have their own ideological principles and history. Regional specificities play a role in moulding the character and modalities of functioning of the women's groups and the CBOs. Anuradha Pande, UMP coordinator says, "There are very few women run CBOs and while they are more transparent in their functioning, their vision is limited because of limited exposure and in interaction with the outside world".

A comparison of the modalities of functioning of various CBOs and women's groups lends itself to the temptation of identifying the best model, or the most effective one in order to replicate it. Scalability has been the fundamental premise of contemporary development practice and discourse. However the contention here is that it

is precisely, the lack of a 'model' that is the strength of this network.

This process has over the years led to social changes which have occurred gradually but in a sustainable and organic manner. Its 'organic' character derives partly from rootedness in history of the region, but also values and sensibilities of people not only associated with the past but also encompassing the present. It is reflected in the fact that a CBO that has adopted procedures and vocabulary of current development practices of funding agencies coexists in the same network with someone who says that relationships established in the villages due to his practice of *tantra vidya* has enabled him to gain acceptability and work towards women's empowerment in a staunchly patriarchal region. The idea is not to dichotomise 'traditional' and the 'modern' and their coexistence but to indicate that the process of social change occurs only at its own pace and rhythm and cannot be imposed based on a rigid set of ideological principle emanating from the 'outside'. The role of the facilitators, CBOs and USNPSS is crucial in instigating the process, facilitating flow of information, sharing of experiences through creating spaces and linking locally specific issues to broader context. Another aspect that needs to be emphasised is that the network and its modalities and agendas have evolved over a long period of time, two decades and more, through sustained engagement and continue to do so.

The next chapter will take an in-depth look at the experiences of the women's groups at the village level in an attempt to draw common strands but also highlight the specificities of their development and ways of functioning. Common strands can be deciphered in some of the changes that are visible, but the process is not uniform and varies across villages and regions, as the WVGs are at different junctures of development.

¹ As USNPSS is referred to locally by the respondents in this study.

² National family Health Survey 3, India, Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, 2005-2006

³ Dr Lalit Pande, Director, USNPSS referring to the ideas of Shri Madhav Ashish which influenced the inception of USNPSS at a Workshop on Community Learning held at Almora 22-23 May 2009

⁴ Based on Annual Reports and interviews with USNPSS staff

⁵ The Anganwadi is a childcare centre which is supposed to be located within the village or the slum area. It is the focal point for the delivery of services at community levels to children below six years of age, pregnant women, nursing mothers and adolescent girls. The ICDS Scheme is a central government sponsored scheme for integrated programme of child development. (<http://anganwadi.ap.nic.in/icds.html>)

⁶ A *margdarshika*, or supervisor is a girl who has already run a *balwadi* for some time and is required to guide and direct the *shikshika* or the teacher in a few villages and monitor the functioning of the *balwadi*.

⁷ *Balmela* is an event meant for interaction between the *Balwadi* and the village where children put on skits, sing and dance, and display their drawings etc.

⁸ Concept of iterative path used to describe the development of women's groups in Pande, 2008

⁹ Based on interviews, discussion with staff, literature produced by CBOs, includes CBOs working in areas which were covered during fieldwork.

¹⁰ Chipko is an ecological movement which started in the 1970s in the hills of Garhwal region in Uttarakhand which became widely known for the act of hugging trees to protect them from being felled.

¹¹ In the Kumaon region, where Chipko had not been strong, women's anti-alcohol agitations had taken off during this period. (Kumar, 1993: 147)

¹² Gandhian ashrams started in the northern hills of Uttarakhand after independence, focussing on organising people against degradation of forest and also led the women's anti-alcohol agitation in the early 1960s. (Kumar, 1993: 99)

Chapter II

Experiences of the Whole Village Women's Groups (WVGs)



As we approach the village, strains of women singing can be heard from a distance. This is a village of about 30 households in Almora district, a few kilometers uphill from the nearest road. About 15 women have gathered for the meeting in the Panchayat Bhavan, after cooking the afternoon meal. There has been scanty rainfall in the region and as a consequence there is not much work in the fields, at a time which is otherwise a busy season in the farming cycle.

The sangathan in the village was formed nearly 20-25 years ago. The CBO started the balwadi and then women started a savings fund. All the women contributed Rs 5 in the initial years and later increased it to Rs 10. With the savings, the sangathan bought several things for communal use like chandni (decorative tent used during weddings), big utensils for weddings and other auspicious occasions or when a household had guests who were visiting. Then somewhere along the way, the savings fund stopped. Last year in March about 10-15 women started the savings fund again for inter-loaning since they had already collected everything that they needed for communal use earlier. 'We take loans for household purposes like buying cattle etc'. But everyone comes for the meetings and even women who do not contribute to the fund take loans on interest sometimes.

'Over the years we literally created our forest from scratch by planting trees and regulating the use. The balwadi bhavan was constructed through the efforts of the mahila sangathan. If there is a problem in some house – health related etc then we try and solve it together or help them in some way collectively. We also went to other villages for tours and joined other sangathans from this area for the Andolan (campaign) for shutting liquor shops.'

An old woman says, "our in-laws stopped us in the early years from going to meetings, they said go to the farm instead-these outsiders are misleading you. These days the young daughter-in-laws are more educated and also there are lesser restrictions on them".

One of the younger women who recently went to Almora for a training says, "I learnt a lot of new things, met women from areas like Garhwal which I had only heard about till then. I came back and told all the others what happened there, all the stories from other areas and things that we could do in our village". Another young woman says, "I wanted to contest the gram sabha elections this time, but then it became a reserved SC seat so I could not but next time I will. My husband is very encouraging –even when my children were small I went to Almora leaving them behind, now that they have grown up I can do much more".

The current gram up-pradhan who has held the post for two terms says, "earlier I used to think this post will be such a hassle, but once elected I got some work done in the village – like digging the naula, the gate to the village and the walking path to the village." One of the women says agitatedly that because her house is at some distance from the rest of the houses in the village, the walking path that was built did not extend up to her house. A discussion follows with the up-pradhan and then some of the other women agree that it is true. Other women say 'she comes back and tells us what happens at the meetings at the block level.'

The meeting ends with a Chetna Geet :-

**Jab ban hi gaya behno ka sangathan,
Isko mazboot karne ka wada karo,**

*Char din ki saheli, saheli nahi,
Umra bhar saath dene ka wada karo*

*Aurato ke liye kuch bhi mushkil nahi,
Aise himmat jagane ka wada karo,
Jab ban hi gaya behno ka sangathan,
Isko mazboot karne ka wada karo...*

(English translation)

*Now that we have formed a group,
We have to make a promise to strengthen it
A friend for a few days, is no friend,
We have to promise to support each other for
life*

*Nothing is difficult for women,
We have to promise to generate such courage
Now that we have formed a group,
We have to make a promise to strengthen it*

*The Seva Nidhi worker then initiates a discussion on
the meaning of this song.*

The above narrative is indicative of the village level group discussions with the WVGs that form the premise of this chapter. It is not 'representative' as the groups at the village level each have their own unique trajectories of development determined by the specific social, economic and political context of the village¹³. While working within a common and related framework, women have worked out particular strategies and over the years have identified their own needs and agendas at the village level. Conversations and interviews with women individually and with CBO workers have provided supplementary information which includes narratives of personal transformations that women have experienced. The frame of reference however is the life histories of the groups and women's experiences in relation to each other and the village. This is partly due to the methodology adopted, but more significantly it is evident in the women's narratives that they choose to emphasise the collective experience

and map the changes at the level of the village over the impact on their personal lives.

A related feature is that the women in most instances have a sense of being part of a state-wide or at least regional network and not just members of an isolated village level group. For many of them this is because of a direct experience of being part of trainings/ meetings at USNPSS in Almora or attending a regional meeting with the local CBO and women from other villages in the region. And these women share their experiences with other women in their village. Also, sharing experiences of groups from other villages is a common strategy adopted by CBO and USNPSS workers. This sense of connectivity is particularly noteworthy in a state which is marked by difficult geographical mountainous terrain and poor infrastructure conducive to isolation.



Common strands and recurrent themes have been identified across narratives from different villages to trace the changes and the path of the WVGs over a span of nearly two decades. This framework includes formative periods, challenges in organising as a group overcoming both resistance from the village community and personal inhibitions, their activities as a group which includes natural resource management, organisation and management of other common resources in the village, engaging with state institutions to demand service delivery and

accountability and a recent foray into electoral politics at the *panchayat* level and active engagement with elected representatives. They have through the course of this process negotiated social norms, challenged malpractices, habits leading to alcohol abuse and through a series of measures ensured women's presence and participation in the public domain.

The above framework is simultaneously derived from the cumulative experiences of the WVGs across the state and is also a guiding force for their actions because of the constant interaction between different groups. Since 2001, this network of rural women functions under the nomenclature of Uttarkhand Mahila Parishad (UMP).

Formation of Groups: Challenges and Social Changes

This section dwells on the formative periods of the groups to capture the process of formation and sustaining a collective, highlighting some of the challenges for organising and pressures emerging from the community itself. It also charts the evolution of group rituals and practices and their implications on the social milieu of the village.

Majority of the older groups trace their origins to the opening of the *balwadi* in the village. Women started meeting and discussing issues related to education for their children. The association of the village with the CBO and with USNPSS began through the medium of the *balwadi* in the early years. The female teachers, supervisors and CBO workers, responsible for running the pre-primary centers in villages, were trained by USNPSS to organise all women of the village as a single group.

The process of setting up the *balwadi* centres was carried out with the participation of the village community; particularly the women and then

subsequently they became involved in the everyday functioning, monitoring and maintenance of these centres. This process laid the foundation for organising and getting together, engaging in dialogue and taking decisions about issues relevant to the village as a whole.

Village in Almora District

'The *balwadi* and the *sangathan* started in our village 8-9 years ago. Some of the women went on an exposure trip to Surakhet, they met the women's group in a neighbouring village- this created a lot of enthusiasm. After coming back, we requested the *gram pradhan* to open a *balwadi* in our village. Initially there was a difference between the level of participation of women who had gone for the trip and other women in the village but gradually that difference disappeared as the group became more active and engaged with several activities.

Prior to the opening of the *balwadi* there was no safe space for small children. In the initial years the *balwadi* rotated between people's houses. Then all the villagers through collective efforts constructed the *balwadi bhavan*. Someone contributed the land; all the women contributed their time to the construction depending on their capacity to spare time from household chores and farm work. Men also brought cement and stones. Those families who could not help out with construction extended their support by contributing money-Rs 300, Rs 400 for the roof, door etc. We relentlessly worked on the construction of the *bhavan* during mornings and evenings and confined our own work to the afternoons.'

The other surrounding villages in the area do not have *sangathans* but the women say that 'at least 8-10 villages have followed our example and opened *balwadis* and also the work of the *sangathan* has spread through word-of-mouth that has led to the formation of *mahila sangathans* in other villages.

Village in Almora District

“The *sangathan* in our village was formed 15 years ago. There was no primary school in the village at that time. None of the girls went to school. Even our boys could not study because parents did not want to send small children so far. Then the *balwadi* opened through the Lakshmi Ashram and we constructed a *bal bhavan* with some monetary help from the *sanstha* (CBO). We broke canisters to create the tin roof and carried stones etc ourselves. Children as old as 12 years came to the *balwadi* at that time as it was the only accessible opportunity for education. “My daughter only studied in the *balwadi*, never went to school but she was capable enough to run a *balwadi* in the neighbouring village”...

Rupa Devi, CBO worker from Danya, says, “The *sanstha*’s work with the *mahila sangathans* started more or less with the *balwadi* program. The *abhibhavak goshtis* (parent meetings) we held back then were nothing but women’s meetings. The discussion of issues started from there. I used to share examples from one village to women in another. The closing down of the *balwadis* has had an impact on working of the *mahila sangathans* in some places. We had to hold meetings for nearly a month to explain the reasons why we were closing them down and also convince people to look after the *anganwadi* in the same way and continue with the *sangathan*’s work. Earlier there were 40 *balwadis* in our area, now there are only around 15; hence the number of workers has also decreased. The ones who are left are not able to go to all the villages frequently particularly the ones which are remote. Constant reinforcement is important; otherwise the groups become less active.”

Clearly the CBO workers, *balwadi shikshikas* (teachers) and *margdarshikas* (supervisors) were crucial in facilitating the formation of *sangathans*,

but examples of groups from other villages whether through exposure tours or through word-of-mouth have been instrumental in invoking the need amongst women for organising in their own village. This is particularly true for the groups that have been formed in the last 10 years, emerging in a different context in the absence of *balwadi* as a binding force but where WVG has acquired the status of credible institutions in the imagination of people across the state.

Village in Seraghat, Pithoragarh

The *sangathan* was formed four and a half years ago. The *Adhyaksha* (president of the group) says, “I went with the *balwadi shikshika* for an exposure tour to Shama village. After listening to the experiences of the women there I thought we should also have a *sangathan* in our village-because there were lots of issues in our village that needed to be tackled collectively. I asked all the women to come to *Shivalaya Mandir* (temple) for a meeting and that is how the *sangathan* was formed. Our biggest problem was cattle straying into our fields and destroying the crops. We came to a consensus and started imposing a fine of Rs 30 every time someone’s cattle strayed into another’s field.

Initially we did not tell at home that we were going for meetings because we had no sense of what it entailed but after attending a few meetings, we came back and started telling at home what happens at these meetings and what all of us talk about. Several miscreants in the village raised all kinds of questions in the beginning especially when we started protesting against alcohol abuse and gambling. The *adhyaksha* says, “Those who indulged in these activities were infuriated and called me all kinds of names, they said I was *amara* (loose virtue) etc”. There was not much opposition from women’s homes but these people said “what is this *sangathan*, who gave them the right to stop us.”

Diffusion has occurred through other means as well, for instance a girl who was a *balwadi shikshika* (teacher) in her native village initiates the idea and becomes a facilitator in the village she goes to after marriage. *Padyatras* are carried out by CBO workers and women particularly in villages which do not have a women's group to create awareness.

CBO worker, Almora District

“Every year we hold a *padyatra* to create awareness, and go to villages where there are no *sangathans* yet. Last year the *padyatra* was to find out how many women in the villages know what *panchayati raj* is. In one of the *padyatras*, we stopped in a village after 7 pm to hold a meeting with the women. None of the women came and all the men of the village were there. They said ‘you tell us what you want and we will go and tell our women. Women make *rotis* (bread), look after cattle, they do not make *sangathans* at night’. We argued with them almost all night. They said all kinds of things like, “you want women’s empowerment-go chase away the wild boars, give us schemes if you have any”. In this manner they continued for a long time. We gave them examples of other villages and the activities they have carried out. After several hours of questioning they started to agree with us and said that ‘our women are very backward, you will have to do a lot of work to convince them’.

A pressing issue that has been affecting people in the village and the women particularly (alcohol abuse in the case of the following narrative) has also acted as a catalyst in some instances, providing the immediate impetus for organising. Often, presence of women in the village who are willing to take the lead is also an important determinant. Women who have been active in village life or are perceived to be so by others tend to play an instrumental role in the initial

years in strengthening the group. Also, in several instances women initially emphasised on education as a criterion for someone to be elected the *adhyaksha*, however, when talking about actual experiences older women were seen as credible leaders, as they commanded more authority in the village.

***Adhyaksha* of a group from Garur, Bageshwar District**

“Our village is one of the very backward villages here. And alcohol abuse was a very big problem. The men often would not differentiate between who was the mother, daughter and there was no respect for women at all in general. People in this region cited our village as an example of the worst kind of backward village possible. As it is on top of the hill and there are other villages on the way up, our men after drinking would come up and on the way indulge in unruly behaviour, abusing, shouting which also gave our village a bad reputation.

In 2005, there was this man who came home drunk and fought with his wife, he threw out all the oil that she had stored for a festival that was coming up. She was so frustrated that she went around the village and gathered all the women to do something about this problem. After that we called a meeting of all the four villages in the neighbourhood and took out a protest rally. We went to all the liquor shops, stopped men who were sitting around and playing cards and took it in writing from the shop owners that they will not open the shop after 6pm. The men who were alcoholics hurled abuses at us. We explained to them and then threatened them that we will take official help. We roamed around in the four villages for days with *bichu ghas* (a plant that stings) and waylaid men who were carrying liquor before they entered the village.....

Adhyaksha of a group from Garur, Bageshwar District

.....They still drink but atleast with some respect. These were the beginnings of the *sangathan*. Then we called a meeting in the village, asked the *gram pradhan* and other elderly people in the village to come. In front of them we chose the *adhyaksha* and women for other positions, then registered at the Block and paid Rs 400. The *pradhan* was very supportive. The *margdarshika* from the village just below ours on the hill asked us to open a *balwadi*. The *balwadi* was opened in a room in my relative's house. This is how we became associated with the *sanstha*.

The women made several trips to the *tehsil* office and the BDO to separate our *gram sabha* after forming the *sangathan*. The Block Development Officer did not even know where our village was. We filled the forms and deposited them signed by everyone in the village. And the new *gram sabha* was formed.”

Most accounts of formation indicate initial resistance from the men in the village usually in the form of accusation against women who played a key role in the formation or emerged as leaders or the *margdarshikas* (supervisors) as corrupting influences and ‘women of bad character’. The resistance was particularly strong where women raised issues such as alcohol abuse. Also narratives indicate a strong initial opposition to women travelling outside their villages to attend meetings and trainings. In some instances women themselves were apprehensive about the idea. One of the *margdarshika* says, “Earlier when women in villages were asked to come for meetings they refused saying we cannot even read and write, how will we do anything. Then we gave them examples from other villages and established contact again and again. Sometimes I even manufactured stories to give examples

usually using some faraway village in Garhwal to convince them in the initial years”. Kamala Devi, *adhyaksha* from a village in Chamoli District says “It was very difficult to organise women in those days, to get them together. It used to cause conflict in the household, there were several instances of fights between husband and wives when they started coming for meetings. Women had many more children and hence had no time for anything else. There were other women’s groups supported by the government but it is here that women actually became ‘*jagrut*’ (aware) over a period of time. Before the formation of the *sangathan* we just went to the forest to cut grass for fodder and brought it home.”



CBO worker, Champawat

“*Sangathans* have formed, some have broken up or been inactive as well. Initially in a village only some women come for meetings, then gradually others start feeling left out and decide to come as well. In the first instance we do not go and say we have come to form a *sangathan*, otherwise they expect a *yojana* (scheme), we just gather women and talk to them about their problems.

The closing down of *balwadis* in recent years has to some extent affected the *sangathans* because the number of workers has decreased and the remaining ones can visit the villages less frequently.....

CBO worker, Champawat

.....And the *sangathans* at least in the initial years and even after that do need constant reinforcement.

The formation of *sangathans* has to some extent reduced the divisions between different castes in the villages, the SC households are not excluded from the activities-it started also with all the children eating together in the *balwadis*. Mixed caste villages are in some ways actually easier to organise because the people are used to dealing with people of other communities on an everyday basis, whereas in the single caste villages which are usually upper castes, the dominant and powerful people think they can exercise control over everyone and they are habitual of being dominant.”

While the goal is to involve all women of the village in the activities of the group, at any point there are always some who are more active than others and also some who are not involved or in disagreement with particular decisions of the group. Diksha Devi says, “Since 1996 I have seen there will always be 3-4 people who will not come around, we just have to make peace with it. In the initial years everyone said that I am getting money for doing this, now after 10 years no one says things like this. But one has to struggle and there will always be some conflict.”

Several of the groups over their life histories have seen conflicts which have led to the break-up of the group and in other cases rendering it effectively inactive for a certain period. Anuradha Pande, UMP coordinator says, “We have recognised this pattern and accepted it. We ask them to resolve the dispute but then let it go. What we have seen so far is that some time later they realise the importance of the work they had been doing and assimilate again. We cannot do too much handholding, they have to realise the

significance of functioning of the group to their lives on their own. In one village for instance, men sent a legal notice to USNPSS saying that we had no right to interfere in the matters of the village and we had to frame a legal response. The group also collapsed once and we also let them go but now they have decided to re-form it on their own. It is best to not enforce something, groups form and break all the time for various reasons. It is only when the women feel the need themselves, that the group will be successful.”

The reasons that have been cited by women for breaks or groups becoming dysfunctional include lack of someone willing to take leadership responsibilities; creation of factions in the village during elections for the *panchayat* and subsequently in the groups and dispute over mismanagement of the savings fund.

***Adhyaksha* from a village in Almora District**

“The women in our *sangathan* are not very enthusiastic. I think one of the reasons is that our *sangathan* broke up several years ago. There were women of two *toks* (hamlets) who were a part of the *sangathan* and there was a dispute over the savings fund. The distribution of money was done by the husband of the *adhyaksha* and there was some mismanagement. As a result the group broke up. It reunited four years ago and one and half years ago we have started collecting money again. I saw the working of the *sangathans* in other villages and felt that our village was losing out. So, every time some of us went to collect wood and fodder in the forest, I brought up the issue. But no one was willing to take on the responsibility of the *adhyaksha* after what had happened earlier. I took on the role reluctantly because I am illiterate and therefore felt ill-equipped to perform the functions.”

The WVGs are communities constantly in the 'becoming'. With time, they have evolved their own modalities of functioning which are not rigid but have the semblance of identity markers. These practices include singing *chetna geet*, performing *bhajans* and songs at weddings and other auspicious occasions; women going from house to house celebrating the festival of Holi; buying big utensils and other such utilities with the money collected through the saving fund. These practices also play a crucial role in consolidating the group as an entity. Nanda Devi, CBO worker says, "The savings fund was a strategy initially to get women together. Collecting Rs 10 every month was a medium to organise a meeting. But the *sangathans* in this area, some of which are very old (15-20 years) and have collected all that they needed do not really see a need for the savings fund anymore. Few have continued for the purpose of inter-lending".

The specificities of these activities are worked out at the village level by women according to their needs and convenience and hence are not uniform across villages and also not static within a village but evolve over a period of time. For instance, the timings and the frequency of the monthly meetings are decided according to the workload on the farms in any particular season.



Village in Almora District

Earlier we did not know what meetings were and what we were supposed to do during them. In the first meeting we collected Rs 2 and then drank tea with it." Later we increased the contribution to Rs 10. The savings fund has contributed to organising the annual function of the village school. After five years, we had collected Rs 18000 and we distributed it equally amongst ourselves.

40 women (there are 150 households in the village) actually contribute to the savings fund but that does not mean that others are not part of the *sangathan*. They come for meetings and support the *sangathan* in all its activities.

Village in Seraghat region, Pithoragarh

Since the *sangathan* started, from the first meeting onwards we kept a register where everyone who came for the meeting put down their signature. Four years ago a lot of them were thumb prints and then gradually everyone learned to at least write their name on their own initiative because they did not feel good using a thumb print while everyone else was writing. Now if you see the register there are only one or two thumb prints.

We hold a meeting once a month, but there are some months in the year when there is too much work on the farms, we do not have meetings. Where as in winter months, when everyone has time, there are two or even three meetings in a month. We collect Rs 10 every month and have started inter-lending only last month, when someone asked for a loan to repair their house. We decided to collect only Rs 10 because all the households were comfortable with that amount. We did not want to hassle anyone.

The practice of running a savings fund is widespread amongst the groups in various forms and for various purposes, however, not all groups operate a savings fund. In some villages, women do not collect money but put the donations made by people when they perform *sangeets* or *bhajans* at weddings and other occasions and the money collected through fines imposed by the WVG on free grazing or for alcohol abuse into the savings fund. Since the group is a collective of all women in a village, the amount of contribution is decided on the basis of capacity to pay of everyone including the lowest income households. The money is used for different purposes, mostly for buying large utensils, chairs, tables and other such things which can be used by all households in the village on auspicious occasions such as weddings. Some groups rent out these to others outside the village and the money is then put into the savings fund. Some groups use the funds for inter-loaning with or without charging interest. The money is usually borrowed by women for household needs like buying cattle, building a house or books for children etc. In Dwarahat region, in particular, the inter-loaning has reduced dependence of households on moneylenders financially, which has also enabled challenging their dominance in the village. A *Margdarshika*, from the region says, “The biggest achievement of the women’s group has been breaking the hold of powerful family/families in the village that usually controlled everyone through loans. The women now use the savings funds for taking loans for their need. In our village, one has to submit an application to get a loan. Women take loans for various reasons – for buying books for their children, daughter’s wedding expenses, for buying cattle, setting up some small shop etc”.

The savings fund is not an exclusionary practice and even women who are not able to contribute money are involved in other activities of the group, they are entitled to use the common utensils when needed and in many instances are able to take loans from the fund as well. A

margdarshika from Almora District says, “One family in the village that had traditionally been ostracised by the village community because of some old dispute has also been brought into the fold after the creation of the *sangathan* and has access to all the communal things bought by the savings fund”. *Adhyaksha* of a WVG from another village says, “I am illiterate and so is the treasurer of the group so her husband helps us with the accounts. We have used the money collected for buying utensils, chairs, tables etc for common use by everyone in the village. There are 3-4 women in the village who do not contribute money but they still support us in our activities, they come for *kirtans* at weddings and for the monthly meetings. We also collect money through imposing fines on people whose cattle stray into others fields.”

Village in Danya region, Almora District

We all contribute Rs 10 to the savings fund every two months. When there was a wedding, or other celebrations, everyone ate in plates made out of leaves. We started collecting Rs 5 and collected utensils for communal use, *chandni* for weddings. People gave money to the *sangathan* on auspicious occasions in their households and we put that in our fund. We first hold a meeting before buying anything and come to a consensus on what is needed the most. We lend it out on rent as well to others outside the village and deposit the money as well. An old woman who has been the treasurer since the beginning says, “I cannot sign but the accounts of the fund I know in detail by rote.”

Interestingly, women leaders in villages also use the idea of the savings fund to leverage support from other women on other issues. The *Adhyaksha* from a village in Dwarahat while narrating their efforts to negotiate with government officials for a water scheme says, “I have told all the women in the group that if you do not speak up and support me in front of these

officials, then I will go to the bank in Dwarahat, withdraw the money and give it back to everyone, because there is no point having a *sangathan* if we cannot raise our voices.” While the savings fund in many cases keeps the group together, there is cognition amongst women that collecting money is not the only or the most prominent reason for the existence of the group.

Savitri Devi, Almora District

The *sangathan* in the village was formed in 1990. In the first two years after formation, we were only collecting money during the monthly meetings. I was starting to get bored because it was very unexciting to just run a savings fund. However, after the *sangathan* was formed in neighbouring Shilling village, we observed the various activities they were carrying out.

Then we started taking collective action like regulating free grazing of cattle and cutting of trees in the forest. Initially also all women of the village were involved with the *sangathan* but the difference being at that time they thought they were doing all these things under some kind of pressure but now they all understand the need and value of this action. We cleaned the paths in the village, cut the bushes etc. Eventually the men also stopped objecting to our work...

There was a lot of opposition from men initially. Even now, there are instances when women get beaten up after they attend meetings and go home. Men call all kinds of names-labelling the group as ‘*sharab virodhi*’ (alcohol protestors).

After all these years –women can come out of their houses, they know their rights. They have at least started thinking about issues like dowry even if there are not any drastic changes. Girls study beyond inter and have started going to college. There has been a lot of development in the villages since the formation of the *sangathan*.

The savings fund and associated practices of buying things for communal use may have been adopted by a certain group in emulation of other groups, but with experience they identify their own needs and design their own modalities. Over the years, there is a gradual diversification in the usage of money collected. It is now also being used to help poorer households in the village in times of need, to support education of girls from poor households etc.



Another such practice which is common to most groups is that of *mahila sangeets*, i.e. singing traditional songs and *bhajans* (hymns) at weddings and other auspicious occasions in any household in the village. The *mahila sangeet*, holds symbolic value for the groups’ identity but is also significant as it has allowed women to overturn age-old traditions, like women not being a part of weddings or the wedding procession. Now they are integral to all the ceremonies and sing and dance publicly which was a taboo, particularly in the Garhwal region. Women did not come out on festivals like Holi, because of fear of men misbehaving after drinking which had become a common practice. Now as part of the collective, they go to every household to celebrate the festival. However, as the Secretary of the regional federation in Pithoragarh points out,

“While respect for women has increased in the village, men are abandoning their traditional roles. For instance the *sangathan* now has to do all the work at the weddings whereas earlier men

shouldered a lot of the responsibility such as cooking the food. Men are destroying old customs- they are asking for money for helping out with weddings which everyone did earlier voluntarily for any household in the village.”

Bali Devi, *Adhyaksha* of a WVG in Almora District

At the first meeting there were a group of men gambling nearby; at the next meeting we drove them away. We tried all kinds of measures to stop them from gambling, like pouring water over them, stuck *bichu ghas* (a grass species which causes stinging pain) to their legs etc. Now if they want to gamble, they go outside the village. We started imposing fines on men who after drinking alcohol indulged in hooliganism. The first fine was in fact imposed on the then *gram pradhan*, who was forced to pay and then everyone after that had to pay when a fine was imposed. The drinking still goes on but the men at least do not misbehave publicly.

In the initial years there were considerable protests from the men. They said things like these women have become like empty, useless vessels. They said, ‘what is this *sangathan* going to give you-sewing machines, money etc’. They called us ‘singing-dancing women’. Some referred to an incident when people from the Uttarakhand who had gone for an agitation to Delhi were beaten up and killed by the police and some of the women were raped on their way in Muzzaffarnagar. The men said similar things will happen to you if you go to Almora for trainings or other places for meetings. There was all kinds of vicious talk.

Village in Seraghat region, Pithoragarh

“I am almost 70 years old. When I was young, I had seen *Holi* celebrated in my parent’s village joyously and with devotion by both men and women. And here every year there was some incident or the other because men would drink alcohol and misbehave and degraded an auspicious occasion. Eventually women stopped playing *Holi* completely and would not even come out of the houses. After the *sangathan* formed, we reclaimed this occasion after years. Because of our protests against alcohol and men’s behaviour, now we play *Holi* in a fearless and happy atmosphere. Even the young boys are so respectful that they would never intervene when women are playing unless we ask them to join.” We held rallies against alcohol; the problem is not completely resolved still. “I have heard men from Rampur village which is just next to say to each other that it is only safe to drink on our side of the village”.

Earlier it was unthinkable that we would be sitting in a meeting with 4-5 men and outsiders speaking our mind like we are today, especially in this month of the year which is the peak season for working in the farms. It was difficult even to get all the women together. One woman from the neighbouring Rampur village say –“we go out meet 10 different kinds of people, from Garhwal and other places. The first few times I travelled outside the village in a vehicle, I would throw-up but now I have become used to road travel. In Almora, initially we were very hesitant to speak up but then everyone wanted their turn to speak so that their village’s name also comes up and so the hesitation went away eventually”.

Village in Dwarahat region, Almora District

We carried out a rally against alcoholism in the village and campaigned against both those who sell and those who buy and drink. For two-three years there was substantial impact but later they reverted to drinking again, however the men do not indulge in hooliganism anymore like they used to. Social change is not easy, and can go back and forth. In this case the government is opening more and more shops, making it harder for us to protest. But it does not reduce the importance of our protests.

The discussion shifts to dowry and women say it's very hard to get rid of the practice because even the girls want to be given something – jewellery etc when they get married. 'At our monthly meetings, we discuss all kinds of things including who's doing what, what happened recently in villages, someone went to study someplace etc-all this sharing generates and increases information flow'. A young girl who is attending the meeting brings up the issue that there should be a *kishori sangathan* in the village. The women tell her that she should take the initiative, talk to other girls and ask them if they are interested as well, to begin with.

In the process of working as a collective, women in some instances have been able to overcome deep seated prejudices over a period of time, for instance eating together with women of other castes at trainings and meetings, or celebrating festivals together in the village. However, changes in attitude are achieved only through a long-drawn and often conflictual process. A USNPSS worker says, that many women are still reluctant to eat with everyone. The following narrative illustrates how women have been in some measure able to change not only their own attitudes but of the whole village community.

Village in Dwarahat region Almora District

The village constitutes of 15 households and of two communities *Thakurs* and *Brahmins*. They had some dispute 40-50 years ago and families of two communities had not spoken to each other since then. There were constant fights in the village all the time. Seven years ago the *sangathan* was formed. The meetings started happening on the third of every month in different people's houses. Earlier no one knew what was happening in the next house. The young daughters-in-law did not even know what the dispute was about so they spoke to each other on the sly when they met in the forests. The three hamlets had rights over the forest. But no one in our hamlet knew that they even had rights. After the formation of the group we found out the boundaries of their forest. Initially there were a lot of protests from the men. The former *Adhyaksha* said 'my son was provoked by all the neighbours and he told me if you step out of the house I will cut your legs'. Now even the men in the village have started talking to each other after 40 years. In the initial meetings the women did not even drink water from each other's house. After four years they started eating at each other's house. And recently last year the men also sat together in the village at a wedding and ate together. The *adhyaksha* says that the fear of age-old dispute was so strong that in the beginning while clearing the pathways, the women refused to clear the bushes near someone's farms as it may lead to a fight. But gradually everyone understood what we were trying to do.

CBO worker, Bageshwar District

Tea shops in the village were used as an excuse by men to sell alcohol and buy alcohol. The women were very distraught because of the hooliganism so they carried out a 10 day *andolan* where they did not let these shops function, did not let them sell alcohol and not even tea. One man who was selling alcohol was shut in a room and locked till he agreed not to. The women also took out a *padayatra* starting from the primary school and going all over the village. The decision to carry out this *andolan* was entirely that of the women who did not even inform the CBO till it was over. Alcohol abuse by the men in the village brought the women together as they wanted to take some action. There was no respect even for older women in the village, it was difficult for the women to step out and they would skirt around areas where men had gathered because there was screaming and hurling of expletives. Hence they carried out the *andolan*. In the first two months after the *andolan* there was fear amongst the men and it stopped more or less completely, but started recurring although it is much less compared to the earlier situation. Men still drink but they do not misbehave that much publicly. One of the ward members from the *sangathan* says we even threatened them with police reports. “Men sit idle all day long at these newly opened shops. We have even gone to the shops and told the shopkeepers not to let them sit here for hours without any reason, but the shopkeepers said you look after your own men”. One woman says alcohol should be banned by the government.

A woman from a village in Almora says, “Some people in the village said these NGOs are corrupt they will take your money and run away with it. Others called out bad names to women who were going for meetings –called them whores.

Earlier we would hide our faces while walking through public places in the villages, now we walk around with our heads held high. There is a cremation ground in the village where all the men sat and gambled. One day the *adhyaksha* of the *sangathan* went and pulled the sheet from the middle and tore the cards. Now we do not cover our head under any compulsions, but only when we want to, out of respect.” Women are challenging age-old traditions but also contemporary malpractices such as sale of girls to families in Haryana for marriage as was narrated in a group discussion in one of the villages and attempting to come up with solutions through negotiations within the community. The above account indicates that while women are claiming public spaces which had become inaccessible to them due to abusive behaviour of men or tradition through gradually changing customs so that they can participate in festivals and celebrations, they do not see division of chores as a point of contention.



Most women say that apart from sharing of experiences, meetings and trainings provide them a space where they can express themselves but also where they have learnt how to express themselves in front of people. Sulochana Negi from a village in district Chamoli said, “earlier, women had no names...people used to call us by taking the name of our elder child or of the husband. I do not know the names of my mother and mother-in-law. It is only when we got organised that we began to understand this issue.

The change is happening now...in women's meetings we are asked to introduce ourselves. We say our name...which is our identity. We are still mothers and wives and daughter-in-laws but that is secondary...we are what our name is...that is what I learnt in Uttarakhand Mahila Parishad. By attending meetings at Almora, we learn many things and when we go back to our village, this learning is translated in to action. This can transform thoughts at home too...now, my children know my name. They also know what I am doing and this in a way creates a new support system for me. (Annual report, 2008-2009) Pushpa Devi, *adhyaksha* from a village in Chamoli district says, "I send my own daughter and daughter-in-law for trainings, meetings at the *sanstha* and to Almora because I have been there and know why it is important. But others do not understand its need or significance. I have to initiate change from home otherwise why would anyone listen to what I have to say. Older women like me can take more liberties, people also listen to them. When young daughters-in-law become too active it is looked down upon by everyone and no one takes them too seriously. When decades ago I was young I was harassed by everyone when I tried to do something. The men are supportive now that they have seen the work women are doing but it is not easy working in the village. People call you 'neta' and all kinds of things."



Two women from a village in Danya region recall their first journey to Almora for training at USNPSS:

"We did not know how to get to Almora. We changed vehicles asking people on the way till we got there. Even in Almora we did not know how to get to the office, we were just speculating and only knew that the office had a stone roof. But we did not know how to go back either so we decided that we will find it somehow and we did."

"In the meetings they kept saying *purush* (men) and I did not know what it meant and I thought for a long time they were saying *brush* but did not understand why. I saw toilets for the first time and was really scared to use them on the first day. Now of course we have them in most houses in the village. I can go to Almora anytime alone if I have to. I did not know where to wash my face in that building or what meetings were. But only after going I got an idea about these small and big things."

With increasing access to schools, literacy rates in general have increased but also girls are getting educated as well. With women's own experiences and exposure from going out of their houses for activities other than going to the forests and also travelling outside the village, they are more willing to let their daughters go outside the house and pursue higher education. Women value their own experiences of interactions outside the village and in some villages are encouraging young girls to form adolescent groups.

While changes in customs have occurred gradually despite resistance, certain issues like women's attempts to curb alcohol abuse which have been widespread all across the state and a few instances where women have challenged domestic violence stir up hostile reactions¹⁴. In

many instances women have through their efforts, by imposing fines, by threatening men collectively, managed to control abusive behaviour in public. However, women across different regions are struggling with alcohol abuse. Women's travelling outside the village is looked down upon and the trainings are viewed as corrupting influences. CBO workers are often accused by men of inciting and provoking women by taking them to Almora. A CBO worker from Danya region narrates how one instance of a wife getting her husband beaten up after an episode of domestic violence in a village has spread across the area and became a reference point for men to revile the WVGs. "The husband had come back home one day drunk so the woman lost her cool and started screaming at him publicly in the village. The man hurt her hand with a stick so she screamed at him and went to her parent's house. The woman's brother next day came to the village and beat the husband. The man later sold all the cattle in the house because there was no one to look after them and the woman refused to come back. A meeting of the *sangathan* was held and the *sanstha* worker intervened. The man was called to the meeting and he laid down his side of the story and the worker explained to him that he should behave properly with her in case she comes back. Other men who were present said that normally if outsiders had come to beat someone up in the village we would not have allowed it to happen but because in this case it was his fault and we did not want the conflict to escalate we did not intervene. The wife eventually came back after the intervention and he took her to the hospital to show her hand. The villagers say that there is peace and quiet in their house since then."



Village in Danya region, Almora District

A woman narrates how when some of them were taking a shared jeep to Almora for training, men sitting in the back said –“one should beware of these women who go for meetings, they are even beating up men now.”

“At the meetings in Almora and the *Ksbetriya sammelans* (regional meetings), we get information from the outside world whereas the rest of the time we are confined to this hill; learn how to talk in *gram sabha* meetings. When women from other regions and villages share their experiences about what they have done in their villages, we also feel like we should be doing something and also if they have done it, then we can do it as well. If we had not gone there, we would not be sitting here right now. We went on an exposure tour to Garhwal-saw the *chal khals* there and the women there told us about how it had helped rejuvenate their water sources, so we came back and told our *gram pradhan* and also built them here. Older women who had been to Almora came back and encouraged us to go there and told us what happens at meetings. We have performed in the village-singing and dancing, doing *nukkad nataks* (street theatre) where I mime an alcoholic man.” Initially there was a lot of opposition in the village when we went for meetings outside. People said all kinds of things like ‘they are women of loose character, they must be getting money etc.’ There were some men who were supportive as well. It was usually the ones who drank and misbehaved who were saying these things. One of our biggest problems was that men blew up money they earned during the day, on alcohol at night. We even carried out an *andolan* at Danya-at the District Magistrate court. It was sowing season, despite that all of us went, then later some of the men also joined in the protests. Government shops were shut down but still some people sell alcohol in black. But it has reduced and we know that our children will not get spoilt. When they grow up and start going to inter college, they will start spending the money for fees on alcohol. So we raised this issue very strongly and then under the leadership of the *sanstha*, women from 25-30 villages campaigned in Danya and the shops were shut down. Although, it is still a major issue in villages that are near the road.

Organising and Managing the Village Eco-System



Oak Forest planted by WVG, Almora District

An integral part of their regular activities for most WVGs is cleaning the village pathways, common spaces, *naulas* and other sources of water periodically. These tasks are assigned at the monthly meetings of the village. The emphasis on cleanliness and its relation to health was emphasised through the *balwadis* in the villages, and is one of the key activities which groups are encouraged to do from their inception. Apart from having the obvious impact on the village environment, these activities are also often the first experience women have of organising themselves and planning together as a group on a monthly basis.



Chal dug by WVG, Almora

Village in Urgum Valley, Chamoli District

The *sangathan* has carried out several activities like having made a nursery in the village, dug *chal kbals* through *sbramdan* (voluntary work). In the past eight years we dug 204 *chal kbals*. We constructed a water canal with support from CBO, but we did *sbramdan* to build it. We go to the forest together now to collect fodder and wood. And all of us work on each other's farms by taking turns, it is quicker and more efficient. We all felt the burden of work - farming, going to the forest, but now that has become much easier. All of us also do small things like cleaning paths in the village of dirt and mud, clearing out the bushes collectively. At this point the CBO worker intervenes that it is important to value this work even though it may seem insignificant and brings up the issue of relation between cleanliness and

The everyday routine of a hill woman involves household chores, looking after the cattle, going to the forest for wood and fodder, fetching water and working in the fields. The eco-system including forests and water sources are critical to subsistence in this region and particularly play a crucial role in the lives of women. Scarcity of fuelwood, fodder and water due to degradation of environment has a direct impact on the everyday life of women. Thus, management and protection of forests and plantation activity, conserving and rejuvenating traditional water sources like *naulas* are the most prominent activities included in the ambit of '*rachnatmak karya*' for the *sangathans*. The monetary support for these activities is minimal and women contribute their labour and time and sometimes generate resources as well.

With technical support and guidance from CBO staff and USNPSS, in many areas the WVGs have rejuvenated forests, striking a balance between

their everyday needs and usage and conservation through regulation. Women decide on rules for usage, like opening the forest for collecting wood at certain times during the year, prohibition on cutting young trees and branches and cattle grazing to ensure equal distribution to all households of fodder and wood and simultaneously preventing excessive usage.



Village in Seraghat region, Pithoragarh District

People were excessively cutting trees in our forest, we have put a stop to that and now protect it. We demarcated a separate grazing area, planted grass and also oak trees in the forest. We dug a big *chal* in the village and clean it periodically. We also clean the common spaces in the village every month. We fine people who let their cattle loose in the forest

Now we want to construct our own nursery in the village. There was a *chowkidar* (guard) for five years guarding the forest and paid by the forest department but now he has left for some reason and the department is not bothered. So we are thinking that in our next meeting we will discuss hiring a *chowkidar* on our own and paying him either from our fund or by taking contribution from every household.

In another village in Dwarahat, women say they walked nearly 6 kms to get seedlings and then carried them in baskets on their heads on steep hills slopes to plant oak trees in their forest. They also dug *chal khals*, cleaned and revived the *naulas*, made a polythene tank to retain rain water. The choice of species of plants like oak and other broad-leafed species differs from that of the forest department which plants largely pine forests which are commercially viable but of no use to village communities because they do not generate fodder or fuel wood. Further, these forests are exclusive of all other species. Initially, at times the CBO workers had to convince women about what would be the best approach to adopt and why it would lead to improving the quality of their lives. In one village in Almora, the group has created an oak forest on their communal land. The CBO worker says that everyone in the village initially said, only pine can grow on this land, and it's not conducive to the growth of other species. They were then convinced to at least try and now there is a full grown oak forest. A CBO worker narrates an instance from a village in Garur where the WVG registered the forest in the name of the women collectively on 25 hectares of land that belonged to the *gram sabha*. The women then created mixed forest on that land by planting different kinds of trees whereas earlier there were only pine trees on that land. They now sell surplus grass to other villages. During the plantation, she says one woman told her that instead of getting seedlings from outside which will require more water, they should get local seeds because the ones that will take root are naturally adapted to that soil and will draw water from the soil on their own. She says, "The vast amounts of knowledge these so called rural illiterate women have about their own environment is never usually tapped".

The approach to natural resource management is not one of preserving a pristine environment but of maintaining the eco-system where women judiciously use the forest and water sources and

take active measures towards regulation, maintenance and replenishment. Over the years this has resulted in tangible benefits and women are more amenable to taking responsibility. Sarla Devi, *Adhyaksha* of village in Seraghat region says, “Our biggest achievement though is saving our forests and managing them properly. If there is forest, there will be water and fodder and fuel”. Management here also includes addressing power relations within the village.



Natural Water Source

Village in Danya region, Almora District

We restricted access to the water in the *nanla* to ensure equal distribution. In the summers when there is little water, if the person who comes first or whose house is near takes several buckets then some houses will be left with nothing. So depending on the quantity of water we decide how much every household should get and there is a guard at the *nanla*. In fact they say that this practice of regulating water usage started from our village and then spread to other villages in this area. If someone has guests or there is some other occasion or problem then they get extra water for that period. There is piped water as well and recently the tap broke so we all collected money and repaired it.

Scarce resources are also managed through regulation to ensure equal distribution as is discussed in the above narrative. As women from all the households in the village are usually members of the group, compliance with rules instituted through process of dialogue at village meetings is high. This has reduced conflict between households in a village and also between villages which use the same resources. Where conflicts arise, the WVG becomes the forum where they are resolved in most instances. Narratives about regulating cattle grazing are particularly illustrative. A former primary school teacher in a village in Seraghat who also manages the savings account of the group says, “I think their biggest achievement has been solving the cattle problem. It used to create so much conflict in the village earlier, fights would break out every day somewhere and the productivity of the farms was also very low. Also they have planted almost 8000 trees in the forest, no amount of money or forest department pressure could have achieved that”. However, the village communities are facing consequences of environmental degradation which are beyond their control and have an adverse effect on their livelihoods. Scarcity of rain and drying up of water sources and instances of animals like wild boars and monkeys who have started coming frequently to the villages and destroying crops have been reported by many groups across regions.



Nursery planted by WVG, Chamoli

Village in Danya region, Almora District

We planted trees in our forest and also created a common area for grazing, put up a boundary wall to protect the forest from stray animals. After regulating and creating a common land for grazing, the first year every household got 119 bundles of grass, and then 240 next year. However people from the neighbouring village used to come and steal wood and grass from our forest because they do not have a forest of their own. We tried stopping them several times but it did not work and they misused the forest as well. They would even steal grass from our fields if there was a wedding in the village and everyone was busy there. When confronted, they said that even our ancestors survived on stealing from here and our mothers-in-law demand that we come and get grass and wood from here. So five of us from the *sangathan* went to the *patwari* (revenue official) to complain but he did not come. So the next time we had a meeting at the *sanstha*, we went to his quarters which is next door and threatened him that if he does not come we will go to the District Magistrate. He came with them and we all went to the jungle and actually caught a woman red-handed on top of a tree. The *patwari* (revenue official) fined every household in that village Rs 500. Now all of us take turns at guarding the forest every 5-6 months and every household pays Rs 6 to that woman. They still steal but it has reduced to a large extent.



Entrance to the Forest planted by WVG, Almora District

Village in Danya region, Almora District

The *sangathan* since the past three years has undertaken the project of cleaning the village paths and the *naulas*. Five years ago there was a massive water problem in the village but now after periodically cleaning the *naulas*, some water has started to surface. We go to the forest together to get wood and grass and have also set regulations and monitor the usage. We were told to dig about 20 *chal kbals* by the CBO, but we dug 35 on our own initiative. We have also collectively put out the fires in our forests.

There is also a demand for toilets in every household. We feel if some houses are getting help to construct toilets, then everyone should get it. At this point the CBO worker intervenes and says that the *sanstha* can only give out some in a village at a time, but the lowest income households should get priority and that decision has to be taken by the *sangathan* on a fair and just basis. She also says that they should make this demand at the Block level as well.

The construction of toilets in houses is an activity supported by USNPSS since the early years. It met with some reluctance initially and involved changing mindsets¹⁵. As Anuradha Pande, UMP co-coordinator says, “Earlier people particularly in the Garhwal area did not want toilets built in their houses. Some said we have all this jungle to go to, what is the need and why should we have something dirty in our houses. There were instances where toilets built by another agency were converted by people into shops or structures to store fodder. Now people are actually demanding toilets for their houses”. The monetary help provided was partial and was intended only as an incentive, which meant that people had to invest remaining amount on their own, they had to be convinced about its utility.

At any given time, support for the number of toilets allocated to a village is limited; the group

takes a decision on allocation. A CBO worker from Karnaprayag says, “About 20 toilets have been built in Jakh village (a village with about 150 households) with help from USNPSS. The women of the *sangathan* decide which households get them first with lower income households getting priority. Our role is limited to going around the village with them and taking down names”. The process of allowing women to take decisions on their own has enabled them to engage proactively and identify needs which are foreseeable only at the level of the village. The *adhyaksha* of a village near Karnaprayag says, “We want to build a common bathroom and toilet at the *dhara* (water body) because even though there are toilets in individual houses, no one is using them because of scarcity of water. The men go to the *dhara* and go about their business in the open but obviously women cannot do that”.

Demanding Accountability from State Institutions and Influencing the Development Agenda



Many groups have been actively engaging with government apparatus and functionaries to demand effective services particularly in the area of education and functioning of schools. The women discuss the problems they face and attempt to come up with solutions which involve talking to government functionaries, pressurizing them as a collective and in certain cases more

active forms of protests such as *dharnas* and *andolans* (campaigns and protests).

The example of interaction of the WVG with the government run *Anganwadi* centre under the ICDS (Integrated Child Development Scheme) ¹⁶in certain villages where the *balwadi* supported by USNPSS had been running is interesting. In an attempt to avoid duplication, *balwadis* are shut down in a village once an *anganwadi* centre opens. The women had a crucial role in the maintenance and functioning of the *balwadi* and were responsible for any decisions regarding it such as selection of the *balwadi* teacher etc. While women do not feel a sense of ownership for the *anganwadi* centre which is seen as a government run institution, they constantly compared its functioning to that of the *balwadi* and also expected the *anganwadi* worker to perform in the same way as the *balwadi* teacher. The group's monthly meetings become a forum for articulating and discussing any such grievances.

Village in Danya region, Almora District

It has been about a year since the *anganwadi* opened in the village and the women say they monitor and support in the same way as the *balwadi* but also expect the *anganwadi* worker to perform like the *balwadi shikshikas*. The *Anganwadi* worker is present at the meeting. The women have some complaints about the functioning of the *anganwadi* which they voice. The worker who is a newly married girl says that she has just started coming out of the house since a year and is still learning and she has a small child which imposes constraints. The women say they understand which is why they do not object to her shutting the *anganwadi* at 11 am instead of 12, but she should establish contact with everyone atleast once a week in the village like the *balwadi shikshika* did. Also she should inform someone in the village if she is taking leave on any particular day.

Women have enforced accountability individually and as a group for proper functioning of hospitals, schools, getting basic amenities like water, electricity in their villages. The support of the other women through the collective is an enabling factor in building the confidence of women which allows them to question and challenge 'authority figures'. The WVGs are increasingly recognised by state functionaries as a credible force and even by men in the villages as the following narrative indicates. A CBO worker says, "These days any official who comes to the village asks for the *adhyaksha* of the *sangathan*, not the *gram pradhan* because they know that these women will create trouble later if they are not consulted".

Geeta Devi from a village in Dwarahat region

narrates an instance about the malfunctioning of the government hospitals¹. She took her daughter to Bhik Sain to administer an injection. She says she called the hospital first to check when she should bring her because it costs money to travel all the way there from the village and she did not want to go when the doctor was not available. They went and were made to wait for a long time after which they were told that it cannot be administered today. "I confronted him and asked why and told him if he cannot do it today, why did he not say so on the phone. And he should reimburse the money for their bus tickets". He said my parents have invested in my education to make me a doctor and I am not obliged to serve you. To which she replied then go and work in some private clinic and make money but you cannot draw a fat salary in a government hospital and fool people. The doctor got annoyed and her daughter heard him tell someone else-how dare they talk to me like this! I feel like injecting her with the wrong medicine. After this she refused to get herself injected. She says she brought this issue up at the next *sammelan* (regional meeting). They lodged a complaint and the doctor was transferred from that hospital.

Village in Dwarahat region, Almora District

Recently a hospital has been constructed in the village which was necessary as people had to be taken all the way to Ranikhet for any major illness and during emergencies. However the women say that the hospital is just a fancy building as of now with no facilities or doctors. After the women campaigned and brought it to the notice of authorities-even the *Tehsildar* (sub-divisional officer) and District Magistrate had to come down here - a doctor visits but only twice a week. "Are people supposed to fall ill only when he is visiting? Even if there was one small room with a doctor, it would have been better than a big building. What is the use, we still have to take someone in the middle of the night to Ranikhet in case of an emergency".

The women also carried out a massive campaign for drinking water scheme for their village. They were asked to submit Rs 110 per household. The pipe fittings are still going on but it will take several years for the water to actually reach their village. They say that "we do not regret paying; atleast future generations will have regular supply of water." Because of irregularity and scarcity of rain, crops are not yielding as much as they used to. They sold surplus grass and used the money recently to rectify all the broken taps and water works in the village. If we go anywhere, and interact with officials we know we have the support of all the women of the village.

Village in Seraghat region, Pithoragarh District

The inter-college was built through our efforts. We held a big campaign for this school. It was peak season for work on the farms, but all of us left that, and blocked all traffic on the road—we even stopped the *prets* (spirits) from going through Triveni Sangam-(cremation site for villages from surrounding three districts). The MLA’s jeep was passing, so we stopped his vehicle and we agreed to let him go only once he gave it in writing that the construction of an inter-college would be considered.

In some instances the groups have set up regular monitoring mechanisms like going for a meeting with the teacher to the primary school, first of every month or looking at the attendance registers. The meetings also act as forums to discuss issues collectively that all households have to deal with. For instance, absence of adequate health infrastructure has forced women to rely on traditional mid-wives for child-birth¹⁷. In many villages women still give birth at home with help from midwives who are older women in the village. However, younger women are reluctant to learn the skills and thus women actively demand better health services and are also attempting to find ways to bridge the gap.



Traditional Houses, Almora District

Village in Danya region, Almora District

The *Asha* (government health worker) designated for this *gram sabha* is from another hamlet, so she never comes here. If someone is about to deliver, the *adhyaksha* of the *sangathan* takes her to Almora. All of us want her to become the *Asha* for our hamlet because she also knows the work of a *dai* (mid-wife). They decide they will propose this the next time there is an open *gram sabha* meeting. It is a big problem because both the *Asha* and the official *dai* are from another village and they do not come here because it is too far.

The engagement of the groups is also going beyond asking state institutions for effective services as recipients. Women are making attempts to influence the development agenda according to their needs and priorities and succeeding to some extent. This involves challenging existing schemes and their premise or modifying them according to local context—whether it is rejecting road construction because it adversely affects the productivity of farms and cuts through water sources, determining where it is built or ensuring that water supply is distributed equally, instead of being directed at households of a particular caste residing in a certain part of the village. Durga Devi, *Gram Pradhan* of a village near Karnaprayag says, “All of us protested against the construction of a road the way it was planned initially because it would have cut through our farms and also dried up the water sources. We want development for our village but if there are roads beneath our feet and above our head then what will we eat. All the women went to Karnaprayag to protest for two days. We even slept on the road. Finally the Sub-Divisional Magistrate came to the village and said that the earlier survey was wrong and the location of the road was changed.”

Village in Dwarahat region, Almora District

The group is currently fighting for water supply. A water scheme came to the village as they had applied for it. Finally after six years it came to the village and 200 litres of water is promised to every household per day. The village is divided into two hamlets where people of two communities live. The tank was going to be installed in one hamlet of the village where the dominant community lives. The *Adhyaksha* in a meeting with the officials told them they have to install the tank in the middle of the village and have two pipes-one going to each side of the village so that no one has monopoly over the water. She says that in the initial meetings, the officials had promised there was going to be 3 inches of water, now they have come down to one and half inches. Hence this time they will demand that they give it in writing about installing two pipes for the two hamlets. She says it is only when one has the support of the *sangathan* that you can speak up and raise your voice. I have told all the women in the group that if you do not speak up and support me in front of these officials, then I will go to the bank in Dwarahat, withdraw the money and give it back to everyone, because there is no point having a *sangathan* if we cannot raise our voices. She says, "I am from a very poor family, I could not even speak to two people outside the house without getting embarrassed but now I can take on all these officials. But it can only happen with the support of the *sangathan*."

The mid-day meals scheme¹⁸ in schools has met with opposition from the WVGs particularly in the Dwarahat area. They have opposed it because they feel that it adversely affects the quality of education in the schools which should be the priority. Shanti Devi from a village in Dwarahat says, "First the government should ensure

provision for what the school is meant for- education. There is only one teacher in the primary school for all five classes but they are busy feeding children with rice." Shanti Devi says, "Our children go to school to study, if there is no quality education then what is the use of feeding them rice. Our slogan is 'No *bhiksha*, yes *shiksha*' (we don't want alms, we want education). In the last academic year, the half yearly exams had started and the children had not even got their books till then. We are capable of feeding our children and we feed them something when they leave and when they come back, the government should ensure that there are teachers in school and that they teach well. How many times are they going to eat in a day? This scheme might be useful in other areas where there is scarcity of food, right now we can feed our children sufficiently."

CBO worker, Dwarahat, Almora District

Another issue that we have tackled in the past few years – there was a constant complaint from women that the primary schools were not working properly-either there were not enough teachers, or they were not working properly. We carried out a *dharna* and the school management has become better. Regularity in the functioning of schools was a major issue. Because of the mid-day meal scheme, in many of the schools children were sent to get wood, or to ration shops to get grain. After the women protested, atleast in the villages where there are *sangathans* children are not made to do all this work.

The CBO workers facilitate dialogue and on occasions women approach them when they feel incapable of resolving an issue on their own or the presence of someone from outside the village becomes necessary to negotiate internal conflict. Rama Devi, a *margadarshika* from Almora says, "The women feel equipped after all these years to handle issues related to *jungle, jal, zameen* (forest,

water and land) based on their knowledge and collectively creating a consensus but say they need information on laws and the functioning of institutions like *panchayats*, or matters such as how and where to apply for a widow pension etc”. While women expect the state to provide services in education, health water and other basic services, they are resistant to the idea of state control over forest. In Kauna hamlet, for instance the women actively intervened when the *sarpanch* gave an application to the forest department to plant trees in their forest. The women protested and then convinced the men that if forest department acquires control, they will lose all control over the management and usage of their own forests.

Village in Danya Region, Almora District

It has been three months since ration has not come to the ration control shop. Except three households, all the others in the village are BPL (Below Poverty Line) households, so the household budgets are drastically affected without the subsidised ration supplies. The *gram pradhan* says if everyone signs a complaint against the ration shop owner, I will take it to the authorities. She says, “he is selling the subsidised grain and other supplies in the black market outside the village”. Another woman says, “he is from the neighbourhood so we should not antagonise him; after all he is a fellow villager”. At this point others break out in protest. A woman says that he fought the Block Development Committee elections and lost and blames their village for not voting for him. Someone says he previously also wrote 24kgs in their card but gave only 14 kgs. After discussion at the women’s meeting, we confronted him and so he increased it to 20 kgs. *(There seems to be an understanding that he is bound to hold back some amount and that is reasonable as long as it is not too much.)* But now since three months he has been saying that the ration is not coming at all whereas all the other villages are getting their supply. The *adhyaksha* of the *sangathan* says –.....

Village in Danya Region, Almora District

..... “I would have gone and confronted him but when I tried once, a man who was passing by said, “you are from an APL family, why should you care about the rice””. Women start discussing this issue along with the CBO facilitator and come to the conclusion that all of them, not one or two or three, should first go and ask him the reason why there is no ration supply and ask him to do something. If he does not, then they should take further action by approaching higher officials at the Block through the *gram pradhan*.



At the regional level the WVGs have held demonstrations and challenged the administration on controversial issues which have wider political implications and do not always have a direct impact on their personal lives or that of their own village. In a recent case of murder of a female teacher, who was associated with the UMP in 2008, no action was taken by the administration. Women from 60 villages in the area held mass demonstrations to demand action. A CBO worker from Dwarahat recalls the incident. “The person accused of the murder had high-profile political connections; hence all the police officials who tackled the case were transferred. Finally the women decided at a regional meeting that they had to take action. Nearly 400 women from different villages landed at the District Magistrate’s office in Almora and sat on a *dharna*

for the entire day without tea or food. One of them even told the DM that as a public official she was their servant and should behave like one. Finally towards the evening the DM asked two or three people into her room to hear them out. As many women who could fit into the room entered and demanded that something should be done about finding the murderer. She promised that once the *Panchayat* elections which were just around the corner were over they will take immediate action on the case. One week after the elections the murderer was caught.”

In Urgum valley in Chamoli district, groups along with the local CBO held demonstrations for adequate compensation for villages where families were displaced for a hydro-electric project.

Kamla Devi, Adhyaksha, WVG, Chamoli District

We led a protest against the Tehri Vishnugad hydro-power project in Chamoli. The project was stopped for 5-7 years but then they came back and now it has been operationalised. Out of the 116-117 households only 25 were given compensation—some people were given compensation and others not. If there had been a *sangathan* in these villages and they were united, people in that area would not be suffering right now. We all went to protest and support them but if the people from those villages are not pro-active, not much is possible. My parents house is in a village in that area so I grew up there. We used to play next to the river, I feel terrible now when I go there and see that everything has been destroyed. I would not have wanted them to dig through and blast our mountains to create tunnels.

Political Participation and Reshaping Governance

The WVGs are demanding accountability from state institutions and interacting and negotiating with officials to articulate their development priorities. This process has accelerated in recent years with the movement towards active participation in the electoral political process. Several women from the WVGs have contested for the positions of *gram pradhan*, ward members, and block development committee member, particularly in the *Panchayat* elections in 2008¹⁹ and won. The experience of fielding a candidate for state assembly elections in 2006 acted as a fillip for active engagement of women with formal structures of governance and familiarisation with the electoral process.



Political Rally held by Regional Federation, Dwarahat

The regional federation in Dwarahat decided to field a candidate for the State Assembly elections in 2006. The fielding of a candidate by the UMP to contest against mainstream political parties was significant in itself, but through a series of decisions and measures which were different from the normal way of doing politics made the campaign even more significant. The federation nominated a woman from a below poverty line family and the resources for the campaign were generated through contributions from groups across the state. Practices such as bribing voters with alcohol and money which are commonplace were criticised during the campaign. The “Basket”

was chosen as the electoral symbol by the women because it represented their everyday lives. “It is used every day at home in the kitchen to put in chapattis, to collect the waste from cowsheds, to carry manure to the fields and bring back vegetables. Even babies sleep comfortably in a basket.” (Pande & Sara D, 2008)



Campaigning for Assembly Elections 2007 by WVGs

Meena Devi, talking about the experience of fielding a candidate from the UMP says, “Only women are going to support women. People from big national parties tormented us in all kinds of ways. Some men even formed a counter group with the only purpose of opposing us. Since we started intervening in politics, they are feeling threatened. Before the campaign started the Mahila Ekta Parishad was supposed to hold one of its meetings in a temple. The men occupied the temple and did not let us hold the meeting so we moved to another place.”



Regional Meeting of WVGs, Dwarahat, Almora District

Hema Negi, who was nominated as a candidate for the assembly elections says, “The Mahila Ekta Parishad (regional federation) felt that all the big parties were trying to use the group as it had the massive support of women all over Uttarakhand, so they decided to field a candidate in the assembly elections. They also wanted to make a point by fielding a candidate from a BPL family. I was supported financially and in every other way by the *Parishad*. It was difficult because my children were small at that time and there were household chores to take care of but my family was very supportive.

Even though I lost, we all learnt so much during the process of campaigning as well as elections-how nomination takes place, who are agents, how the electronic voting machines work, sealing and counting process etc. The Block *pramukh* (head official) who was from one of the main political parties was trying to influence the voters. The *Mahila Parishad* blocked the booth and said voting will not start till everyone is cleared from near the voting machines. No one should be allowed to come near the machine.” Another woman at the meeting intervenes and says, “Hema may or may not have got a position but the Mahila Parishad definitely won”.

Hema says, “Before the Lok Sabha Elections (Parliamentary Elections) in 2009 all the big political parties asked me to come and attend their meetings and asked for the *Parishad's* support but I told them that I will go back and discuss it with all the women of the *Parishad* since it's a collective decision.” At one such meeting someone told her “your feet are completely cracked”. She says I replied,.....

Regional Meeting of WVGs, Dwarahat, Almora District

..... “I am a woman deeply associated with *jal*, *jungle*, *zameen* (forest, water and land), obviously my feet will be cracked”. Women like me used to get nervous talking in front of several people. If I had to speak in a meeting I used to worry about it endlessly days before the event. Now women are all clamouring for an opportunity to speak at the regional congregations. They get offended and disappointed if they do not get a chance to speak.

Another woman at the meeting says, “All the women have become more politically active since the elections. When the MLA (Member of the Legislative Assembly) came to visit this time at the time of the Lok Sabha elections I told him, “why do we see your face after two years, where have you been all this time?” Another woman from the group tells a story when a local MLA asked her as the *adhyaksha* of her village *sangathan* to gather a crowd so that he can address them. She told him, “you are supposed to be a *jan pratinidhi* (people’s representative), you should go to them, why should I gather a crowd for your propaganda.”

The role of the WVGs in creating a conducive environment for participation in the electoral process is evident. Women have over the years acquired the confidence and also the aspiration to affect change through politics and to influence the development agenda. While some women have contested *panchayat* elections and sought the support of the WVG; in other villages the groups have actively fielded candidates. The process of articulating their situation and negotiating in a group is experienced in the activities of the groups at the village level and the regional level. This process has to a large extent equipped

women to deal with their responsibilities as elected representatives. Further, the group also acts as a pressure group demanding accountability from these representatives.

The issue of symbolic representation as opposed to real participation comes up frequently in the context of women’s political participation particularly in the debate on reservation. A few women *pradhans* said that they resort to taking help from their husbands but make a distinction between help and yielding complete control. Experiences narrated by women also indicate a learning curve over a period of time where symbolic representation transforms into genuine participation through a gradual process.

Women have to contend with entrenched ways of electoral politics that have become endemic to the system such as rampant corruption. Through examples of other women, support provided by CBO and USNPSS through trainings and also through experience they are familiarising themselves with this process and strategies and subsequently challenging them as well. A woman candidate who lost to another woman from the group says that she lost by 3 votes even though everyone expected her to win. People were paid Rs 500 at the last minute by the previous *gram pradhan* who was the other woman’s father-in-law. The husband is in control of everything. She says there is no point in breaking the group by creating conflict, but no new works have come into the village since one and half years. “I have worked to get several job cards made at the block for our village despite losing. The villagers are bearing the consequences of their choice and will think carefully next time around”.

Janaki Devi, Almora District

This time during the *Panchayat* elections, after the nominations were over, we called a meeting and came to a consensus on supporting one of the candidates. She says that she will contest the elections next time. She intended to stand.....

Janaki Devi, Almora District

..... for the Block level elections this time but did not because the Block consists of 4 villages and their village is the smallest; so even with the support of everyone in the village she would not have been able to win. But she says she realised afterwards more than one candidate had contested from other villages which meant that the votes had been divided. If she had realised this beforehand, she says she would have stood for the BDC elections.

She complains that the *pradhan* always elects his favoured people as *panchs*. Earlier women did not go to the *gram sabha* meetings. Now they do and also speak out on what they want, for instance if a road has to be built, they will say that the path which they use to go and cut grass and bring it back should get priority. She says, “Our concern is development of the village, not of cities. BA, MA degrees are useless if one does not know which plant is to be planted where and what is *gudai* (weeding)”.

Manorma Devi, Village in Danya region, Almora District

She has been the ward member (*panch*) from her hamlet for 10 years and this is her second term.

“My brother-in-law one day just came and informed me that I have been nominated a *panch* from this village’. I did not even know what a *panch* was or was supposed to do at that time. Then at meetings at the *sanstha* and at Almora, I heard others talk and decided that I should find out. The *pradhan* (my brother in law) would not even inform me when there was a meeting. One day he was passing by my house and I asked him where he was going, he told me ‘for formality’s sake there is a meeting, but there is no real need for you to come’. I lied at home, told my mother-in-law that they have.....

..... especially called me so I have to go. I packed some *rotis* and walked all the way to Kheti, asked someone where the primary school is. But when I finally reached, the meeting was already over. So the next day I went again and said the same thing at home. At the Block office, everyone was trying to talk to the Block *pramukh*. One man looked at me and said, “you do not know how to talk, what will you say to the Block *pramukh*?”. I got agitated and marched into his office, even held his hand to catch his attention and told him that you are talking to everyone; I have something to say as well. I asked him why people in our village had not yet been paid for construction of the *panchayat bhavan*. It is festival time and everyone needs money. He said he will look into it and also told me to claim the travelling expenses for two days for the meeting. I walked down to the road and saw the *pramukh*’s jeep and asked him if he could drop me till Danya because it was very cold. All the men were gaping at me because I had managed to talk to him earlier and was now sitting in his jeep. I came back and then claimed the Rs 200 for travelling from the Block office. The *pradhan* earlier never told us about this because he claimed that money on our behalf.

Ten years ago, everyone said that ‘this young girl-where will she go’. I was also hesitant. When I heard other women talk at the meetings here and at the *sanstha*, I realised that I should find out what being a ward *panch* means and I felt like going for meetings. Earlier I was very shy and my heart used to start beating faster every time I had to go any new place or speak at meetings or to strangers. Now after attending so many meetings and trainings at Almora that fear has gone’.

The *guls* (cemented lanes) that were constructed for irrigating our farms under a government scheme were built by a contractor who used very little cement so they broke. All of us were facing problems because of that and we discussed it at our meeting. This time when the budget came under the *Rozgar* guarantee scheme (NREGS) for our village, we repaired the *guls* on a priority basis. When the next budget comes we want to build a proper walking path to the village. We all use it and also the cattle is taken for grazing through that path so it’s important to construct it properly.”

The activities of the *Panchayat* are frequently discussed at the group's village meetings, particularly where members are elected representatives.

Village in Dwarahat region, Almora District

All the women now attend the *gram sabha* meetings and ask for accounts of particular schemes. If there is a woman *gram pradhan*, she comes back and shares with the *sangathan* what happens at the block level meetings. If a woman comes to the forefront, she will talk about water, development; bring up issues that affect women like dowry and prohibiting alcohol abuse. A man will not talk about all this.

Only a woman leader who is supported by other women is a true leader, otherwise what's the use if she is just doing as her husband says. Another woman reflects and says "however if conflict occurs because of elections, how will development take place".



Women are also cognisant of the need for shifting the agenda of the *panchayats* from mere construction activity to issues more relevant to their lives. Many active groups have been able to leverage funds through the *panchayat* for activities that they perceive to be of utmost need in the village or influence the direction of schemes according to their needs.



Champa Devi, *Gram Pradhan*, Village in Garur region, Bageshwar District

At the first *gram sabha* open meeting everyone voiced their problems- old wooden electricity poles for instance which are causing problems. Earlier when the *gram sabha* was large, no one in our village knew what open meetings were. The *gram adbhikari* is supposed to come and tell us about all the schemes available. I have been attending the BDC meetings as well where officials from all departments come. At the first meeting after everyone introduced themselves, I told them about the massive water problem in our village. One of the officials said, 'but there is a water tank in your village'. And then I told them that the tank is much below the village. And the pipe carrying water is 25 years old and has never been repaired. There is very little drinking water in the village and the children drink with a glass from the *naula* which has led to typhoid in several cases. So they noted it down at the meeting and now there is a proposal for drinking water supply.

I have tried to get the widows pensions started for some women since becoming the *pradhan*. I have realised that no one will come and give information while you sit at home. You learn things only once you step out.

Chitra Devi contested against two men on an unreserved seat and is now the *gram pradhan*. She says that there are no meetings being held at the Block level and there are no schemes that have come through for the village. She says at one of the meetings with the *gram senak* she told them there is no road or path that leads up to the village and they need one. Under the NREGA they just keep digging pits, she told them “what is the use, are you going to put me in those pits”. She says the earlier woman *gram pradhan* could not even speak in a meeting and worked under the instruction of her husband who completely controlled the *panchayat*. My husband also helps me out with accounting but at least I can raise my voice and bring forth the problems of the women and others in the village.

She narrates an incident when an old shopkeeper who was drunk and lying on the floor told her “look what a stage we have come to that women will become *pradhans* and lead us”. I told him “you cannot even stand on your feet, let alone leading the village”.

“There is this man in the village who was telling everyone not to vote this time for the Lok Sabha elections because no one does anything for us. I went around trying to tell everyone that it is important to vote and finally managed to convince atleast 14-15 people from the village to go and vote.”



Bhagwati Devi, from a village in Chamoli district was *adhyaksha* of the *sangathan* for one year after which she contested the *Panchayat* elections in 2008. It was an OBC seat and three women from the same family contested. She says the elections caused a rift in the village and to some extent in the *sangathan* as well. Others gave money, food and drink so that their wives would win. My husband did not even come out of the house during those days. Four of the surrounding villages here have women *gram pradhans*. There are seven ward members in our *gram panchayat*, out of which three are women. In my tenure as the *pradhan* I have suggested the building of *chal khals*, *barat ghar* (space for weddings), houses under the *Indira Awas* scheme (Government housing scheme) and get some of the old works completed. When we organize our monthly meetings, we delegate work amongst ourselves, I also tell them about the *panchayat* activities and lay down the accounts. People have said to me -it is not the *pradhan's* work to go door to door and call people for meetings, but I do that because why should I be arrogant-that's not how work gets done. Women wanted me to continue as the *adhyaksha* but as the *pradhan* I have to attend several meetings and there is a lot of responsibility so I could not. Now we have elected a new *adhyaksha*. My husband does not say anything, he says people have elected you now it's your burden and responsibility. I have overheard people at the Block level saying that no one has ever seen the face of Jakh's *gram pradhan*.

A big problem is that there is commission for everything taken by everyone at the Block level. On the NREGA work, because ours is a big village, we have thought that everyone will take turns - 10 different people for every new work that comes in. The job cards have been made for most people, some are pending but the applications have been sent to the Block.

The level of participation of women in *Panchayats* differs from village to village and regionally in the case of some WVGs is absent. Even in villages where women hitherto have not attended *gram sabha* meetings, it is increasingly coming up for discussion because of UMP's activities in other areas. A CBO worker from Champawat district says, "The issue of political engagement of women has certainly started coming up in the meetings of the groups but it will take time for women to start getting active in our area. Currently women *pradhans* are only there in name, as their husbands or other men in the family run the show. Just day before yesterday the Block *pramukh* at a meeting got angry and threw the '*pati pradhans*' (term used to refer to husbands of women who hold the power when their wives are elected the head of the village council) out". Women from a particular village at a regional meeting in Karnaprayag, Chamoli District say: "In 2008, we elected a woman *pradhan* from our village and she is also a part of the *mahila sangathan*. But after getting elected she has stopped coming for our monthly meetings. Just now when I heard the woman *pradhan* from another village talk and all the work she is doing and also involving the *sangathan*, it struck me that we do not even know what our *pradhan* is doing. We should go back and ask her about these things and to involve us in *panchayat* activities and decisions".



Reasons cited for not attending *gram sabha* meetings range from lack of awareness, meetings

held at a distance from the village, household responsibilities, and 'it is sufficient for the men of the house to go'. Some women say they feel ill-equipped to contribute because they are not educated.

Village in Chamoli District

The ward member from the village is a woman from the *sangathan*.

On being asked if any of them attend the *gram sabha* open meetings, the response was that none of them attend the meetings, even the ward member seemed uncertain. One woman says –if there are two of us in the house –both cannot leave and go so my husband goes. Also says, our awareness of our rights is very limited. We hold our meetings within the village but know very little of what is happening outside. A man sitting in the meeting says that recently there was an open meeting of the *gram sabha* and not even one woman from the village was present there. Someone says "we are illiterate; we do not have enough information why will they listen to us. Our *gram panchayat* is very big with two other villages that are a part of it." Discussion follows on the importance of attending open meetings and there is a suggestion from the CBO worker that they should hold a meeting in their village prior to the open meeting, including the men, to come to a consensus on the agenda for their village and the demand for works or activities they want to lay down before the *gram sabha*. The problem that has to be tackled in the near future is lack of adequate medical facilities–someone says that the ANM (Auxiliary Nurse Mid-wife) tells us that, "give me *ghee* (butter) and then I will come and see you". And also protest against officials from the forest department uprooting the trees that the women have planted which has happened recently.

Village in Danya region, Almora District

The road to the primary school is currently very bad and it's dangerous because small children take that route and there is constantly a danger of them hurting themselves. So now we will put in a proposal for a *pucca* road on that route. But none of the women go for the *gram sabha* open meetings, which is where such proposals can be made. Only our husbands go or the ward member, who is also a woman from the *sangathan*, goes. But our husbands never come back and tell us what happens at these meetings. A discussion follows on the significance of attending meetings. Someone says, "it's like the *Didi* (CBO worker) or the *adhyaksha* told us to clean the pathways in our village so we do it, but the realisation on our own has not come yet. We choose our *adhyaksha* but also have to respect her and support her otherwise what's the use of the *sangathan*."



Elections in many instances also seem to have created conflict in the village and in some WVGs as well rendering them dysfunctional temporarily. At a meeting in Almora, women from a village in Pauri Garhwal reported that after the *panchayat* elections the meetings of the group have stopped. The woman whose husband lost in the election is angry and there are different caste groups in the village so two factions have

been created. In some instances, women come up with mechanisms to resolve such conflict through discussions.

Village in Dwarahat region, Almora District

In the *Panchayat* elections in 2008 a woman from the *sangathan* was elected as the *gram pradhan*. Both the women who stood for elections were from the *sangathan*. However they had a meeting prior to the elections where the women of the village came to a consensus and said they will not support either of the two if they attempted to break the *sangathan* because of the elections. This was the reason for the break of the group earlier. During the previous *panchayat* elections the group was broken because there were two women contesting which created conflict and divided the group. This time however one of them was elected but there was no manifest conflict after the elections and everyone gave their support to her.

The WVGs have provided an empowering context for promoting the participation of women in formal governance structures at the grassroots level. This has happened indirectly through confidence building and other skills that women have acquired over the years as members of collectives and also through more direct interventions in recent years where women have realised the need for becoming a part of the governance structure to influence the development agenda in their favour as members of the village community, but also as women. They have to negotiate tremendous pressure in this staunchly male dominated bastion of politics but the support of a strong collective force as UMP is tilting the scales in their favour. However, the work of the UMP faces impediments on many fronts as it challenges traditional power structures. As Hema Negi says, "working as a political activist in the village is not

easy. One needs a lot of intelligence to be able to reply to tough questions often asked by men to test your wits". "It is difficult to channelize votes towards WVG members in villages because men who are not happy with the WVG take this opportunity to work against us. How can we win the elections because we have always been against the system? Many times we have made complaints against irregularities in the education department and in the health department, now these people join to oppose our actions and not give us votes. Also, the local functionaries in the block headquarters seem to be threatened by our growing power...so they do not want us to be members of *panchayats*...if we go we will question their motivation and nobody likes that." (Annual Report, 2008:16)

Conclusion



The above accounts provide an overview of the way the UMP has evolved as a collective over the years, its predominant engagements with certain aspects of the environment, state institutions and social structures. The practices and rituals that have evolved over the years give the WVGs an identity even as women determine their own needs and modify these practices and rituals accordingly at the village level. The discussions reveal the specificities of the way women organise themselves at the village level, the conflicts that occur as women overcome their

own inhibitions as well as issues that emerge from the village community and in their interactions with state institutions. The various forms of interactions with other WVGs, CBO and USNPSS workers highlights the gradual process of confidence building both at an individual level and as women learn how to work and negotiate in a collective through their own and other women's experiences. Narratives of the mechanisms of getting together, breaking up and reforming in some instances illustrate the challenges in the process of collective building and also of creating deliberative spaces. The collective journey of the WVGs also indicates some of the tangible changes that have occurred for instance improvement in the general cleanliness and hygiene of the villages due to increase in the construction of toilets and also women's efforts to keep the common spaces clean; growth in the forest cover and diversity of the plant species in certain regions critical to sustainable livelihood and particularly its impact on women's everyday lives; increase in women's participation in formal institutions of governance; better functioning of schools in certain villages and change in social norms around women's participation in weddings and festivals. Women have in many instances been able to curb abusive behaviour by men in public due to alcohol consumption; however this is an issue on which women in many villages are constantly struggling with.

The following in-depth interviews with four women from different regions provide an insight into the process, continuities and changes over individual life spans and specific contexts and are also stories of personal transformation. The next chapter examines the experiences of WVGs, and reflects on the strategies and modalities of functioning of the USNPSS network in the backdrop of the wider discourse on participatory development, gender and empowerment in theory and in practice. It also outlines organisational challenges and opportunities

emerging due to the changing political, economic and social milieu.

Life Histories

Saraswati Devi, Almora District

Saraswati Devi started working as a balwadi shikshika in her native village and then later became margdarshika organising women's groups in the Dwarahat region and works with the CBO in Dwarahat. She talks about her personal journey and her experiences of working in the villages.

My mother comes from a very conservative family and gave me the same values and instilled the same fears that were in her mind. I studied up till class 8 and wanted to study further. But everyone around me – neighbours, other girls of my age started saying that I will soon not be able to do any farm work if I spend that much time in school. In 1990 I got married and left for my in-laws village but came back home after six years because things did not work out. At that point in time because of my upbringing and the atmosphere in the village, I genuinely believed that women are incapable of doing anything on their own.

My children were going to the *balwadi*, so I went there sometimes to drop them and pick them up and sometimes just to sit and watch. The *shikshika* at the *balwadi* moved away to another village so I was asked by the CBO representative to run the *balwadi*. Initially I refused to do it. I even started crying and said I am not capable of running it. They asked me several times and then I came to Almora at Seva Nidhi for training. At the training I was extremely nervous. Everyone introduced themselves and I just could not and would start crying. Those were very bad times, I would cry for anything and everything. I wrote down the *bhav geets* (songs taught to children in the *balwadi*) like all the other girls but could not get myself to sing them. The trainer noticed my behaviour and

would speak to me for hours on end giving me numerous examples of other women and telling me inspiring stories. I was there for 10 days and at the end of it I think something changed in my mind. I came back and filled the high-school form. In 2000, after 16 years of leaving school, I went back to studying, sat for the exams and cleared them.

I started running the *balwadi* in the village. 25-26 children used to come to the *balwadi* of all ages, two of my own included. It was not easy initially, looking after children of all ages keeping them busy and engaged productively. But I grew very fond of them eventually. I did not feel like leaving the *balwadi* every day. Next year I went for the training at Almora and some of the *shikshikas* from other regions who had also come for training in the previous year told me that I have changed so much in one year.

I started going to the regional meetings, heard lots of other women speak and that gave me courage. I stopped feeling like a victim. However, every time someone taunted me in the village about living at my mother's house, I would run to the *balwadi* crying. I became *margdarshika* and started training others. At first, I thought I would not be able to travel to different villages, but I kept struggling and got over this fear as well. Sometimes I would manufacture stories to give examples usually using some far away village in Garhwal to convince women in the initial years-to inspire and generate enthusiasm. I contested the Block level elections but lost. The people in the village still have this notion that the daughters of the village have no rights. But I learnt a lot just through the process of fighting an election. Now over the years I have been a part of so many *andolans* (campaigns) with the *sangathan* on several issues. Recently at a *chakkajam* (blocking traffic) in Dwarahat that we carried out, the *tehsildar* (local government official) came up to me and said "everywhere there is trouble I see you, you have become a pain in our neck". I have heard this from many men in

the villages where I go to meet women's groups who say that I provoke their women.

The biggest achievement of the women's group in this region has been breaking the hold of powerful family/families in the village that usually controlled everyone through loans. The women now use the savings funds for taking loans for their emergency need. In our village one has to submit an application to get a loan. They take a loan for various reasons – for books, daughter's wedding expenses, for buying cattle, setting up some small shop, telephone booth etc . Women have also started to think for themselves and also therefore for the village from their own perspective.

Radha Devi, Almora District

Radha Devi was the adhyaksha of the sangathan in her village for 11 years and also served as the gram pradhan for five years. In the following narrative, she recalls some instances of struggle and achievement of the sangathan.

The *sangathan* was formed in our village 15 years ago. In the initial meetings everyone said - we should appoint an *adhyaksha* who is educated. However no one agreed to take the responsibility. So after three years, I took on the role despite never having been to school. The first thing we tackled was the water problem in the village. Within three months the villages started receiving piped water. I ordered the four taps in the village to be locked so that use of water was regulated and also to ensure that everyone got sufficient water. The teacher of the school abused me in the village publicly, screaming and shouting continuously from 1pm to 4 pm. He also tore up registers of the *sangathan*, but I did not relent and personally stood guarding the taps.

The *sangathan* also played a crucial role in getting electricity for the village. Some men from the

village had gone as many as seven times, but the officials did not pay heed to their application. Finally they came back and asked that the women should do something about it. All of us arrived at the office at 5am and once it opened, we told the officials they will not leave till their demand was fulfilled. Other people who were coming to the office were getting annoyed but the women did not yield. When tea came for the officials, I told them they cannot drink it until they also serve tea to all the women who had been standing since morning. They even closed the window through which they dealt with people. Finally the officials promised that the matter will be dealt with in one week and we all came back home. Eventually the village was electrified.

The primary school teacher of the village was notorious for drinking alcohol and lying intoxicated on the ground somewhere in the village instead of being in the school one day I saw him in the nearby town, getting drunk in the middle of the day and decided to confront him. I came back to the village, and immediately called a meeting to discuss this problem with all the women. We all went to the school and saw him lying on the floor. The women told him this was unacceptable behaviour and locked him within the school premises for the whole day. Because he was an upper caste *Pandit*, he thought he can get away with anything. Finally at the end of the day he asked for forgiveness and said he will change his behaviour and teach properly during school hours.

There were times when I was reduced to tears and had to hear all kinds of things from everyone in the village. I have struggled so much for the *sangathan*, more than I have for my own family's well-being. There are 12 different castes that make up this village which causes conflict many times and makes it challenging to keep the group together and carry out activities in the village collectively.

I contested the *gram sabha* elections in 2003 against six men including my brother-in-law and won. A meeting of the *sangathan* was held prior to the elections and everyone decided that I should contest. We invited the men in the village as well but they did not come. There was a problem with the voter's list and many of the names were missing. So the *sangathan* protested. We went to the Block office to lodge a complaint and said that we will not let the elections be held until the list is rectified. The women sat at the school the whole day and did not let the elections take place. Twelve officials including the Block Development Officer came to the village and asked for the *adhyaksha* of the *sangathan*. They even suggested that I should become the *gram pradhan* unopposed. But I said no because everyone should be able to exercise their right to vote and proper procedures should be followed. They asked us to register a complaint on bond paper, but we said we will not pay for the bond paper because it is their responsibility. Finally the list was corrected and one month later the elections were held. Eight people contested including 6 men and my own brother-in-law. The women supported me in every way possible. I come from a Below Poverty Line family and could not have won without their support. They even paid for my journey to the counting booth. As a part of delegation of women *gram pradhans* in 2003, I went to Delhi and met the President of India. The president called out for the woman who had won against six men in her village and I went and met him.

However, now my brother-in-law has become the *gram pradhan* in 2008 and is harassing me because of his earlier defeat. I feel distressed and scared all the time.

I was the *adhyaksha* of the *sangathan* for almost 11 years. But this year we thought someone new should take over this position. So a new *adhyaksha* has been appointed. I do not think she is able to effectively lead the *sangathan* yet and sometimes it is painful to see that years of my

effort are coming apart. But I resist the urge to say anything because everyone learns slowly over time and things have to change.

Bina Devi, Chamoli District

Bina Devi recalls how she got inspired and motivated to work towards protecting forest and organising women in her village in the 1970s and the differences in the differences between then and now.

When I was a young girl I had gone with my parents to a relative's house in Reni village, the place where the Chipko movement started. While there, I happened to sit in one of the meetings of the women and they were talking about protecting forest and regulating their use, not cutting trees indiscriminately etc. That meeting left a deep impression on my mind. Five years later in 1975, I got married and came to this village. Drawing on that memory as a little girl, thought it would be a good idea to form a *sangathan*, so that we could collectively plant trees and create a forest. I organised the women and we started regulating the usage of the forest and collecting utensils from the money collected for communal use. There was not even a single tree on the mountain. We went and got seedlings from a nursery. All the women walked 7-8kms uphill, planted the seedlings, and constructed a wall around them for protection.

There was a lot of protest from many people in the village at that time. Elderly people in the village told me, 'you are inciting our daughter-in-laws'. My own in-laws were furious and harassed me in different ways. I remember this day when I was not given food by my mother-in-law and went to the forest hungry. One day there was a fire in the forest and I called everyone to help douse it, but my mother-in-law forbade everyone from going with me. Despite that a few women did come with me. My mother-in-law even cast aspersions on my character. However, after these initial attempts we had to move away to the city

as my husband got a job there. The *sangathan* in the village was scattered after that. Years later we came back to the village to live with my in-laws. In 2004, we started a *sangathan* again in our village. We started collecting Rs 50 every month, constructed a *Milan Kendra* (room for meetings) in the village and also planted trees in the forest. I got in touch with someone from the *sanstha* (CBO) and started the process. The forest that we had built in the 1970s had been destroyed over the years.

Because of the NREGA however recently everyone has started expecting money for activities that we carried out voluntarily earlier-like cleaning our own paths, *dhara, naula* –once I even put Rs200-300 out of my own pocket in the savings fund just to inspire everyone. Now the women ask why they should work for free and waste their time, when earlier they cleared 3kms long path just like that.

These days' women are more educated and aware of their surrounding, so in some ways it is easier. But on the other hand it has become very hard to motivate women to work for the welfare of the village. Since the NREGA has been operationalised, they expect to be paid for everything. They say, 'why should we waste our time working for free'. Even for the monthly meetings, some of them come, others don't. There is no opposition from home like in the older days. The daughter in-laws who come to the village are more educated and knowledgeable but no willingness on their part to do anything unselfishly. Girls do not get married till they are 22-23 years old and study much more as well, but a lot of people cannot afford to educate them beyond a point.

I send my own daughter and daughter-in-law for trainings, meetings at the *sanstha* and to Almora because I have been there and know why it is important. But others, who have not, do not understand its need or significance. I have to initiate change from home otherwise why would

anyone listen to what I have to say. People say that other villages are getting this, that and the other from other NGOs, what do we get. They tell me that, "you go to Almora-what do you get-nothing".

I keep telling them that trees are like our own children, they have to be nourished and protected. Other issues that come up for discussion during our monthly meetings are abusive behaviour by men after drinking; problems that some households may be facing like how we can help out someone if they are unable to pay their children's fees etc. The women go for a meeting with the teacher to the primary school, on the first of every month. In the inter-school many of the children were not going and yet there attendance was there in the register. We confronted the teachers and now they ensure that the children come to school. The women also go to the *gram sabha* meetings and raise their voices. They pressurize the ward member to do work –for instance recently there was something wrong in the way payment was being made for the works under the NREGA, and because all of us collectively questioned it, it was corrected.

We should consolidate the *sangathan* in the future-make sure that our forests are protected and ensure better quality education for our children by constantly talking to the teachers. Older women like me can take more liberties, people also listen to them. When young daughter-in-laws become too active it is looked down upon by everyone and no one takes them too seriously. When decades ago I was young I was harassed by everyone when I tried to do something. The men are supportive now that they have seen the work women are doing but it is not easy working in the village. People call you '*neta*' (leader) and all kinds of things. Also the bottom line is that these days everyone is looking for material rewards.

Nanda Devi, Almora District

Nanda Devi has been working as a CBO worker in the villages in Danya region for several decades. She talks about her own personal transformation and her experiences of organising women.

I started working at the *balwadi* when I was 18 years in my native village. I loved working with the children but had to leave work after three years when I got married and left for my husband's village. I was used to working so wanted to continue doing it, particularly with children but it was not possible. Soon after marriage, I started experiencing problems at my in-laws place. My husband did not do any work and I was mistreated there. When my son was only a few months old I came back to my parent's house as the situation became unbearable. I expressed my wish to start working at the *balwadi* again after my son was two years old. I started working as a *shikshika*. At that time girls as old as 12-13 years old used to come. I went from house to house to convince people to send their girls to the *balwadi*, did all kinds of odd jobs to help people- writing their letters, going to the bank to fill out applications etc.

I realised that despite having studied till inter-school, I got married into a household where I was not respected and hence from then on only wanted to work to solve others problems and do social work. My confidence grew with time and also I knew from personal experience the kind of problems women have to face. I became a *margdarshika* and started looking after the work in 10-12 villages, and also the work with *mahila sangathans* had started by then. I have built long-standing relationships with people in the village over the years. They trust me and know if they ask for any kind of help, I will do it. I started with Rs 200 salary but they were equivalent to Rs 2000 because the work gave me satisfaction and also a purpose in life after having been through hard times in my husband's house. These days old *Gandhian sansthas* are not getting any funding, it is

only going to project-based NGOs but there is no feeling in that work. I understand these women because I was one of them, but I feel I have become different now over the years. I have become accustomed to leading a societal life – leaving everyday in the morning with a *jhola* (cloth bag), going to the villages, talking to people, sharing their happiness and sorrow and helping in small ways. Sometimes I wonder what will I do if the *sanstha* shuts down, because I cannot go back to being confined to looking after the cattle, and working in the fields only.

When the invitation comes from Almora for trainings, we read the letter out aloud in the village and encourage younger women -the daughter-in-laws to come. If the older women come, the younger ones do not get an opportunity to speak. Last time I came with some women to Almora for training who had come to a town for the first time in their life. It is a huge responsibility. Even men in the villages trust me and hence send the women with me all the way to Almora. We do not give them anything-not even bags or copies like in other trainings-here we only share our thoughts, experiences and information. Women say they feel strengthened as they know they have some support because of me. Once a month when they hold meetings in their villages, they think collectively about the development of the village.

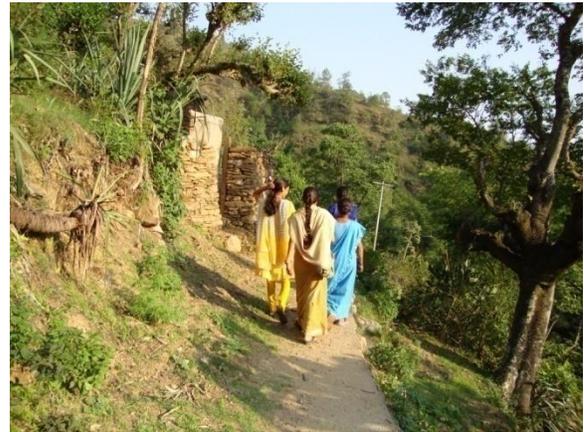
We just give suggestions to the *mahila sangathans*, the rest is up to them and how active they are. For instance in one of the villages, even the *sarpanch* knows that if he does not give women work under various schemes; they will go to the Block. Only their village in the area has finished the new batch of work under the NREGA because they are so active.

The *sanstha's* work with the *mahila sangathans* started more or less with the *balwadi* program. The *abhibhavak goshtis* (parent meetings) we held back then were nothing but women's meetings. The discussion of issues started from there. I used

to share examples from one village with women in another. The closing down of the *balwadis* has had an impact on working of the *mahila sangathans* in some places. We had to hold meetings for nearly a month to explain the reasons why we were closing them down and also convince people to look after the *anganwadi* in the same way and continue with the *sangathan's* work. Earlier there were 40 *balwadis* in our area, now there are only around 15; hence the number of workers has also decreased. The ones who are left are not able to go to all the villages frequently particularly the ones which are remote. Constant reinforcement is important; otherwise the groups become less active. Women in some villages say, "We have collected all the utensils and other things we need for communal usage, so we do not need to collect money anymore, hence we will hold meeting only when you come".

The savings fund was a strategy initially to get women together. Collecting Rs 10 every month was a medium to organise a meeting. But the *sangathans* in this area some of which are very old and have collected all that they needed do not really see a need for the savings fund anymore. Few have continued for giving loans to those who need money or specific needs. For *sangathans* to be active it is important that the CBO worker makes frequent visits. Also some women within the village have to be active, understand and realise the importance of the *sangathan* and lead everyone else. Some women speak more in the meetings, others take an hour to say their name, and start giggling. In one meeting when we were doing a survey, women who had more children, felt ashamed and refused to speak. Sometimes other factors have an impact as well. For instance in predominantly SC villages, women go out to labour and earn daily wages so they do not have the time as it means loss of income and they have to look after the household chores as well. These days the discussion is usually around *Panchayat* activities and works coming through various schemes in the village. Also *Panchayat* elections

have created conflict in some villages and split the village including the women into several factions.



¹³ Excerpts from focus group discussion with women in different villages have been included in this chapter and are illustrative of these specificities. Names of women have been changed.

¹⁴ Among women age 15-49, 26 percent have ever experienced physical violence and 5 percent have ever experienced sexual violence. Twenty-six percent of ever-married women report having been slapped by their husband; 7-14 percent report having their arm twisted or their hair pulled, being pushed, shaken, kicked, dragged, punched or beaten up, or having something thrown at them. Six percent report that their husbands have physically forced them to have sex. Overall, 28 percent of ever-married women have experienced physical or sexual violence from their current husband or if not currently married, their most recent husband. (NFHS 3)

¹⁵ In rural areas in Uttarakhand, 58 percent of households do not have any toilet facilities. (NFHS 3)

¹⁶ The Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) Scheme is a early childhood scheme launched in 1975 by the Government of India with the objective of improving the nutritional and health status of children in the age-group 0-6 years and providing pre-school education.

¹⁷ Almost half (48%) of births during past five years were assisted by a traditional birth attendant;

only two-fifths of births were assisted by a health professional. Twelve percent were delivered by friends or relatives. A disposable delivery kit (DDK) was used for only 23 percent. (NFHS 3)

¹⁸ “With the objective of enhancing enrolment, retention and attendance and improving nutritional levels among children, the National Programme of Nutritional Support to Primary Education (NP-NSPE) was launched as a Centrally Sponsored Scheme on 15th August 1995, initially in 2408 blocks in the country. By the year 1997-98 the NP-NSPE was introduced in all blocks of the country. The objectives of the mid day meal scheme are: Improving the nutritional status of children in classes I-V in Government, Local Body and Government aided schools, and EGS and AIE centres. Encouraging poor children, belonging to disadvantaged sections, to attend school more regularly and help them concentrate on classroom activities. Providing nutritional support to children of primary stage in drought affected areas during summer vacation.” (http://india.gov.in/sectors/education/mid_day_meal.php)

¹⁹ Uttarakhand is one of the first states to introduce 50% reservation for women in Panchayats and currently has 55% women representatives in the panchayats many of them winning on unreserved seats as well. (The Times of India, 28 August, 2009)

Chapter III

Alternative Paradigm of Change



The experiences of WVGs and USNPSS network in the hill villages of Uttarakhand illustrate an approach to development embedded in context and culture, driven by the community, and seeking sustainable change. The vision of change has been guided by principles of ecological sustainability and the strategy is focused on creating inclusive collective spaces for interaction, deliberation and negotiation through the formation of the women's groups. With women at the centre of this process, concerns which were of particular significance to their everyday lives have gradually become a part of the agenda. In the initial years, addressing the well-being of the larger village community was at the forefront. Monthly meetings have provided women within the villages a space for getting together to pro-actively discuss and take decisions about the well-being of the whole group. It has also connected them with the 'outside' world

through interactions with groups in other villages, the CBO and with the USNPSS. Creating spaces for these interactions and linkages was a critical part of the intervention.

The conventional understanding of 'development' defines it as 'planned change'. The process of planning is based on a normative idea of what this change should constitute and the specificities of the particular context dictate speed and strategy rather than direction. Recent development theory and practice emphasises the importance of participation of the 'subjects' in the planning process at the stage of conceptualisation as well as implementation. Chambers (1997) argues for a reversal of power relations in the implementation of development projects and shifts in priorities and thinking, from things and infrastructure to people and capabilities, emphasising the importance of well-being, livelihood, capability, equity and sustainability. While the vision of change at USNPSS was circumscribed broadly under the umbrella of environmental education and ecological sustainability (which also drew upon the context of the region), the modality of functioning allowed for the agenda to evolve over the years encompassing issues that emerged with changing political-economic and social milieu but also from women's understanding of their environment as they strengthened their capabilities to articulate and act upon issues and work as a collective. The 'unintended consequences' of the interventions were not curbed but accepted, and in some instances encouraged and guided by the USNPSS, which also accounts for the diversity within the network in WVGs from different villages, regions and CBOs.

Taking responsibility for changing their own lives began with the *balwadi* and working towards rejuvenating forest and water sources for many of the older WVGs. Education of children was perceived to be of great significance by the entire community and forests and natural resources are

integral to daily livelihood, hence women's efforts to engage with these issues were largely acceptable to all and these issues were also of utmost priority for women initially. This engagement led to confidence building and allowed women to work out the modalities of working as a collective in a deliberative manner, thus enabling them to engage with a wider gamut of issues which they identified over the years based on their needs. Taking decisions such as which household gets allocated the limited amount of money available for construction of toilets or coming to a consensus on equal distribution of water were key to an organic progression towards actively participating in formal governance institutions. Beginning with demanding accountability in delivery of services by state institutions, women through discussion began to first question and then challenge policies and schemes which were not in sync with their needs. This is reflected in instances of channelling funds from the *panchayat* for construction activity to projects that were of utmost priority for women and opposing schemes such as the mid-day meal for school children.

Through certain practices such as *mahila sangeet* women have also altered social norms, particularly gendered norms around women participating in marriage celebration and festivals. Other deep rooted values for instance around inter-mixing of castes have been modified to some extent inadvertently in the process of working collectively. However, as narratives of groups in different villages demonstrate, the trajectory of change was not linear but went back and forth as women engaged in a process of learning through experiences of their own as well as of other women as a part of the network. A process of this nature is bound to be gradual as internal conflicts within the community are negotiated along the way but also results in sustainable changes. Further, hill villages in Uttarakhand are small with a relatively lower level of socio-economic differentiation and also high incidence of male migration means they are

predominantly inhabited by women. These factors are conducive to creating groups which encompass all the women in the village.



Meaning of 'Participation' and Role of the 'External'

William Easterly while critiquing Western Aid Agencies makes a distinction between 'Planners' and 'Searchers'. "A planner thinks he already knows the answers; he thinks of poverty as a technical engineering problem that his answers will solve. A Searcher admits he doesn't know the answers in advance; he believes that poverty is a complicated tangle of social, political, historical, institutional and technological factors. A Searcher hopes to find answers to individual problems only by trial and error experimentation. A planner believes outsiders know enough to impose solutions. A Searcher believes only insiders have enough knowledge to find solutions, and that most solutions must be home grown." (Easterly, 2006:6) The framework developed at USNPSS since the mid 1980s which has evolved over the span of two decades into a network encompassing CBOs and women's groups and through them village communities across the state aligns with Easterly's notion of 'Searchers'. From its inception, working with small CBOs and individuals required flexible and adaptive need based approach. The nature of funding also

allowed for a non-prescriptive model of functioning.

The emphasis of the endeavour is on information sharing and awareness generation as opposed to tangible, measurable outcomes and planned activities. The agenda has evolved over the years experientially and not as a linear progression towards pre-determined goals. The most significant aspect is that of strengthening women through building collectives which are inclusive. This process is intrinsically political, involving negotiation as women identify their needs which may be divergent at times, and devise strategies through a collective process. As a consequence there is no compartmentalisation of different spheres of life. Promoting a sense of responsibility and awareness to instigate thought and action amongst women is the driving motivation as opposed to creating dependence on the organisation. However, increasingly in sync with the shifts in development practice, funding is available largely for projects that have pre-defined objectives and expectations of certain outcomes and the USNPSS framework does not fit into this model of time-bound project development interventions. As Easterly points out, “The working-level people in aid agencies and non-governmental organisations are more likely to be searchers than planners. Unfortunately the political realities of rich countries- the bipartisan support for Big Plans – foist on these workers these Plans, taking money, time and energy away from the doable action that workers discover in their searching”. (Easterly, 2006:6)

The critique that has emerged of participatory development practices have largely centered on the role of ‘external intervention’. The terms ‘organic’ and ‘spontaneous’ which have been used to indicate processes of formation and functioning of the women’s groups are not meant to suggest unprompted action but an experiential process. The role of ‘external’ in this instance- USNPSS facilitators and the CBO workers who

are in sync with the sensibilities of the region which is a function of time and constant engagement with the communities over two decades is not to set goals or objectives and ensure enforcement but to work in tandem with the women to chart a course of development based on certain guiding principles and needs identified by women, in the process enhancing their capabilities and expanding their aspirational horizons.

Women’s groups at the village level and the regional federations are part of the organisational network along with the CBOs and USNPSS and are not simply on the receiving end of interventions. However, the level and nature of participation differs from village to village and also individual women. This is contingent on a range of factors including the nature of leadership at the village level as well as at the CBO level, and the frequency of interaction with the rest of the network amongst others. A CBO worker from Almora district says, “We just give suggestions to the *mahila sangathans*, the rest is up to them and how active they are. For instance in Dharagarh village, even the *sarpanch* knows that if he does not give women work under various schemes; they will go to the Block. Only their village in the area has finished the new batch of work under the NREGA because they are so active”.



The role of USNPSS’s intervention is to promote inclusiveness and empowerment that is drawn

from the strength of the collective, and encourage women to counter certain established economic and social hierarchies, particularly of caste and gender. The emphasis is not primarily on individuals but on the community as a whole and the idea of enabling women to exercise their agency through the act of creating deliberative spaces - with the constant attempt to make and keep these spaces inclusive. A critical organisational principle has been to include all women in the village in the group irrespective of their caste, or economic status. This does mean rendering the groups susceptible to a conflictual time-consuming process of negotiation but also enables genuine accountability and management of collective resources as several examples indicate. Equity in distribution of resources and prioritising the needs of low income households is emphasised by the USNPSS and CBO facilitators in discussions. The fact that women from all households are a part of the group (although their levels of participation may not be the same) is instrumental in ensuring that the agenda is not dominated by any particular interest, and this is also emphasised by the CBO and USNPSS workers in all their interactions.



The concept of the homogenous, non-conflictual 'community' is an often repeated trope in literature on participation. Nelson and Wright observe (1995:15) 'community' is a concept often used by state and other organisations, rather than people themselves, and it carries connotations of consensus and 'needs'

determined within parameters set by outsiders' (Mohan in Cooke and Kothari, 2001, 160). Community may be used as a definition of exclusion as well as inclusion, drawing on religious, ethnic, locational differences and is not necessarily compatible with the universalising notion of equality or with rights of particular individuals (Cleaver in Cooke and Kothari, 2001, 53). The functioning of the groups at the village level demonstrate that active community of women was not a given but has evolved over the years through interventions, predominantly creation of spaces for discussion and negotiation which recognise the differences and conflicts in the village community rather than try to supersede them. These deliberative spaces draw upon and are in continuum with and yet distinct from everyday spaces of sociality. For instance, one of the facilitators point out that in the initial years of trying to get the women together, folk songs and dances were used to get meetings started and everyone to open up. But now *mahila sangeet* which includes songs specifically sung at village meetings of the groups and those performed at weddings and other auspicious occasions have become identity markers as well as markers that trace changes in social norms. The *adhyaksha* of a WVG from a village in Almora says that before the formation of the *sangathans* it was unheard of that women attended weddings and *barats* (wedding procession). "Now we get a special invitation to come and perform *kirtans* and songs. Singing and dancing by women has become an integral part of the weddings. We also go from house to house on *Holi* where as earlier women did not come out of the houses on *Holi*. As a result there is also more intermixing between people of the two communities, the scheduled castes and the *Thakurs* in the village. The women have started playing *Holi* only since 10-12 years after the formation of the *sangathan*".

'Empowerment' is often described in terms of processes that help marginalised or oppressed people to recognise and exercise their agency (cf Rowlands 1997; Friedman 1992 as cited in

Cornwall in Hickey and Mohan, 2004, 77). However, in the current conceptualisation in development practice the concept of empowerment through participation has become individualised and thus depoliticised and its transformatory edge has been lost (Cleaver in Cooke and Kothari, 2001: 37). Empowerment in the case of the UMP is conceptualised as a evolving process, as opposed to being defined as a measure of performance on certain indicators such as literacy level, participation in political governance institutions or ownership and control over economic assets.

Experiences of the women's groups and the process of organising and mobilising by CBOs and USNPSS, suggest that 'empowerment' - which has been a buzzword in the discourse and practice of participatory development and gender - has here occurred through a collective process. The notion of agency is embedded in social life and relationships and not entrusted in the individual. For instance management of natural resources is not simply a technical intervention for ensuring ecological sustainability but also involves challenging power relations in the village as certain dominant households may have had exclusive or disproportional access to limited resources. Establishing regulations for usage of common resources or on excessive cattle grazing is done at monthly meetings of the groups and there is a high incidence of compliance as women who might otherwise have been offenders become a part of the decision making process. Also it has enabled inter-village co-ordination on these matters. On another level as a collective, women are able to deal with the forest department and have better bargaining and negotiation power. As Hickey and Mohan argue, 'agency' should be understood as a range of socio-political practices which allow people to extend their status and rights as members of particular political communities and thus increase their control over socio-economic resources (2004: 272). Rao and Walton (2004) while employing a cultural lens for looking at

development thought argue for a shift from 'equality of opportunity' to 'equality of agency' approach which is a shift from focus on individuals to a recognition that relational and group-based phenomena shape and influence individual aspirations, capabilities and the distribution of power and agency.

The question that should be asked is not how much people are empowered but for what. Henkel and Stirrat suggest that in the case of most projects, 'people are empowered to take part in the modern sector of 'developing societies' - as citizens of the institutions of modern state; as consumers in the global market; as rational farmers increasing GNP; as participants in the labour market, and so on (Henkel & Stirrat in Cooke and Kothari, 2001, 182). So defined, empowerment need not entail a choice or enable questioning the status quo of larger politico-economic processes and articulating and defining alternative visions of development. This is also linked to the critique on individualised notion of empowerment because challenging the status quo is often a consequence of a collective process of dialogue or engaging with conflicting practices and visions.



Through the course of their work, women are challenging conventional wisdom and practices of the state and in some instances re-asserting their own knowledge and practices as several examples indicate-whether it is in the choice of plant species such as oak and other broad-leafed

plant species as opposed to pine which is being promoted by the forest department; prioritizing farms and water sources over road construction; contesting elections but rejecting established malpractices of bribery and alcohol distribution; or challenging the premise of the government mid-day meal scheme in schools as they value quality education more than free meals. Undoubtedly, some of these ideas are initiated by the facilitators, but they are accepted and taken up only if they find resonance because the women are the primary actors and take ultimate responsibility for their actions.

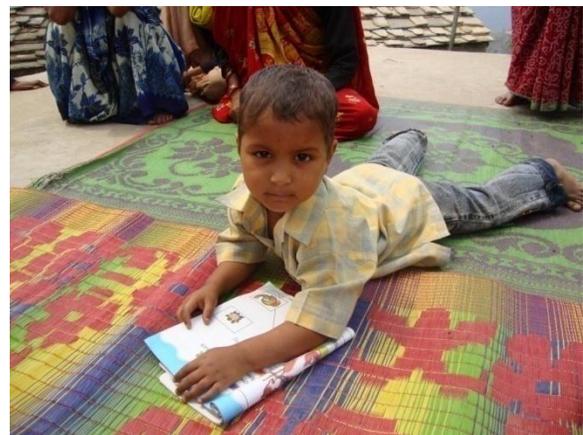
Demanding accountability from state institutions and functionaries as well as influencing schemes in some measure to make them more conducive to needs of the village community has emerged as a significant strand in the work of the groups which has been further strengthened by increasing participation of women in *panchayats*. As White argues NGOs should 'seek to build up the capacity of the state as an integral part of this localized, grassroots work', rather than creating parallel or alternative welfare delivery systems outside the state (as cited in Mohan and Stokke, 2000, 254). Convergence between participatory development and participatory governance take the notion of participation beyond specific interventions to 'an immanent process of social change' (Hickey and Mohan, 2004: 57).

Another critique of participatory development practices has been an overwhelming emphasis on the 'local' as the site of empowerment which leads to a neglect of the larger political and institutional structures and their linkages with the 'local'. A focus on imminent development along with the assertion that it can be managed by building a right mix of institutions has further depoliticised the practice of development (Ferguson, 1994) rendering it a technocratic process to be administered rather than negotiated with and contested by its subjects (Hickey and Mohan, 2004, 10). The women's groups at the village level are able to enter into dialogue on

their everyday concerns and needs, however their participation in the wider network through periodic regional and state level interactions with other women's groups, CBO and USNPSS workers becomes a source of information as well as linking their immediate concerns with broader issues. This is reflected in the shift over the years with the issues that the groups are engaging with, which have gone beyond concerns that are of immediate relevance to their everyday lives. There is a willingness to actively support women from other villages and regions in their endeavours.

Strategies for Organising and Mobilising and Modes of Expansion

In the initial years women were organised around issues of *balwadi* maintenance and children's education. Gradually the ambit of discussion expanded to include other immediate and later broader issues and concerns shared by women. CBO workers report developing personal relationships built over several years and through constant visits while engaging with the everyday life of the village community.



Women's groups that have been formed in recent years in the absence of *balwadi* as a binding factor have organised around issues such as fighting against alcohol abuse or managing forest and other natural resources. Word-of-mouth communication over the years and stories of the

activities of groups in other villages has been critical to the process of formation of new groups. The idea of a WVG being an institution that enhances the well-being of the village and of women in particular has taken root in the imagination of women across the state. Thus even though the number of CBO workers are declining due to shutting down of *balwadis*, women's groups are being formed in new villages. However, CBO workers point out that constant reinforcement is necessary to build a momentum once a group is formed. In some villages certain women emerge as strong leaders and take on this role but in other villages visits by the CBO worker are critical to generating the momentum.

Practices such as periodic cleaning of common spaces in the village and natural water bodies; performing *sangeets* at wedding and other auspicious occasions, using money for buying utensils etc for collective usage have over a period of time become identity markers and are adopted by newly formed groups in the initial years in a symbolic manner but as the groups evolve they develop their own needs and practices based on those needs. Interestingly, evolution of these practices reflects social changes, particularly of gendered norms. The most prominent one is that of women becoming active participants in public and social spaces in the village such as weddings and festivals.



Facilitation by CBO and USNPSS workers guides the discussion through probing questions and also

providing information to fill the gaps. There is widespread association of literacy with capability and leadership skills and women themselves have articulated this perception as they feel that educated women should be made *adhyakshas* as they will be better equipped for that role. Women who have emerged as leaders also say that they could have perhaps performed better if they were more educated. However, on further probing and through experiences of groups it emerges in several cases that elderly women who have generally not had any formal schooling prove to be more effective as leaders. They command more authority amongst the women but also the larger village community and are better able to organise and mobilize women. Their participation also makes it easier and paves the way for younger women in the family and in the village²⁰. A CBO worker says, “When the invitation comes from Almora for trainings, we read the letter out aloud in the village and encourage younger women -the daughter-in-laws to come because if the older women come, the younger ones do not get an opportunity to speak. Last time I came with some women to Almora for training who had come to a town for the first time. It is a huge responsibility. Even men in the villages trust me and hence send the women with me all the way to Almora.”

CBO workers and USNPSS facilitators during discussions emphasise the value of the work that women do in their everyday lives and reinforce pride in the daily work associated with village life whether it is farming or looking after cattle. Women are asked to reflect when they refer to themselves as ‘backward’ or refer to the work they do like cleaning paths and clearing bushes as small and inconsequential. Leela Devi *adhyaksha* of a WVG says, “I am illiterate and so is the treasurer of the group so her husband helps us with the accounts. Our concern is development of the village, not of cities. BA, MA degrees are useless if one does not know which plant is to be planted where and what is *gudai* (weeding)”. A CBO worker shares the story of her personal

transformation, “I got married in 1992 and my husband is a teacher in the inter school in this village. He ran the CBO and was involved with USNPSS, with the *balwadi* and *mahila sangathan*. I came from a conservative family and used to find all this very odd in the beginning. He used to tell me that I should go for the meetings of the *sangathan*. I started going sitting quietly and listening. Soon I realised that despite being a graduate my education had only given me bookish knowledge. When it was my turn to speak at these meetings, I was very nervous and felt embarrassed that I was literate and yet could not even speak in a gathering of women. I then attended training sessions and later started giving health trainings to adolescent girls. I re-educated myself-read a lot, spoke to the ANMs (Auxiliary Nurse Mid-wife) in the villages etc. Now I co-ordinate meetings with women’s groups in different villages and conduct them as well. Earlier I held women in the cities and towns who had regular jobs in high esteem. Now I think we do much more work than them. They only work for themselves. We understand practical things like what happens in a Block Development Committee meeting.”

Sharing experiences of WVGs from other villages acts as a catalyst in expanding women’s thinking. This is a strategy often used by CBO workers during interactions in the village and is also the purpose of regional and state level meetings. Interactions and regional and state level meetings of the women clearly illustrate the impact of sharing experiences particularly by other women who are perceived to come from a familiar milieu and are ‘like one’s self’ in expanding aspirational horizons in terms of what seems achievable, and confidence building. This aspect of empowerment is often underemphasised. Meenakshi Devi *Adhyaksha* of a WVG says, “The exchange of information that happens at our monthly meetings and at regional meetings like these or the ones held in Almora is what matters the most. We get something out of these meetings that is why we leave our work and go

there. Listening to other people’s experiences gives us lots of ideas of what we can do and how to do things and also information about the outside world.”

Ganga Devi from Pithoragarh district narrates, “In 2002, the CBO head Bishtji opened their office in our house on rent. He used to conduct meetings with women from other villages in our office. And I used to sit outside or while doing my chores observe them and wonder what the role of a *sachiv* (secretary) was, *adhyaksha* (president) was. I used to also wonder if I would ever be able to speak like these women. I felt like I wanted to move ahead in life and do more than what I was doing at home. So then I approached him with this other woman in our village that was associated with a *balwadi* in the neighbouring village to start a *sangathan* in our village.” Recalling the first training for which women from her village went at USNPSS, Maya Devi says, “I did not go because I thought it will not yield anything. But the women came back and told me, “you should have come, out of all of us you would have had been able to speak up”. The second meeting then was held in a nearby village Matela and I decided to go. I realised then what it was like, it was very inspiring and, after which I decided to attend every meeting possible. We talked about all kinds of issues – alcohol, government actions, how we vote- something just stirred in my head”.



Cornwall's conceptualisation of 'invited spaces' is a useful framework for examining the nature of group interactions. She defines 'invited spaces as designed mechanisms for enabling public engagement in governance, rather than simply as instruments for local development which are primarily implementation focussed, focussing instead on transformative aspects (in Hickey and Mohan, 2004, 76). The attributes she imputes to such invited spaces are that they tend to be artefacts of external interventions and are distinct from popular spaces of everyday sociality or collective action which are often within homogenous groups. Invited spaces bring together almost by definition, a very heterogeneous set of actors among whom there might be significant differences of status, class etc and they all have rather different stakes and may relate very differently in another setting (Cornwall in Hickey and Mohan, 2004, 76). The boundaries between such and other spaces are unstable and those who participate in any given space are also necessarily, participants in others; moving between domains association, people carry with them experiences and expectations that influence how they make use of their agency when they are invited to participate, or when they create their own space (cf Lefebvre, 1991 as cited in Cornwall in Hickey and Mohan, 2004, 78). Even though power structures outside these spaces impinge on what happens within them, they are 'sites that are constantly in transformation as well as potential arenas for transformation'. These spaces can be used by people to carry out their own agendas and used for purposes other than those conceptualised originally. (Hickey and Mohan, 2004: 76-84)

Spaces for discussion at the village level, regional level and at the state level are to a large extent the essence of the UMP endeavour. The regional and state level meetings serve the purpose of creating linkages between locally specific concerns and broader issues through the interventions of the facilitator. Conflict occurs often within groups as well as within the larger

village community and discussion and dialogue may or not may not result in a consensus but the community undertakes a process of reflection, negotiation which is the only sustainable way of bringing about social change. This process unfolds over a significant period of time and is unlikely to produce measurable outcomes in a time span of few years. The emphasis is on awareness building and experiential learning as opposed to discrete interventions. Trainings which are held periodically at the state level are essentially spaces for discussion and dialogue but also create a sense of network and support.



Gender and Empowerment

Narratives of women across villages indicate that they value their ability to speak publicly at meetings and with state officials which has come about due to their experiences of speaking at village level meetings. The act of speaking in a group builds their self-confidence gradually. The act of using public spaces in the village such as the *panchayat bhavan* by women for their meetings is a stepping stone towards claiming their identity as a group and as women. Some narratives indicate that initially it evoked resistance from men. Working on farms and going to forest, i.e. on the pretext of work they were always visible in public spaces but traditional norms curtailed women's participation in weddings or festivals. Women through creating rituals and practices such as performance of songs at weddings and

celebrating festivals in public spaces as a group have become active in the public domain and this has become naturalised over the years. Protests against alcohol abuse were also to a large extent about reclaiming public spaces for women as several narratives indicate.

Through management of forests, water sources and regulating cattle grazing, women have attempted to address their primary practical concern reducing their own burden and also lessening conflict by instituting mechanisms for equal access and distribution. As women are primarily responsible for collection of fuel wood and fodder, looking after cattle, they were in the best position to take decisions on effective management and group meetings became forums for discussion on these issues. The women do not question the existing division of labour in the household or necessarily see it as being problematic. Their campaigns demanding accountability from state institutions indicate quality education for their children as one of their utmost priorities. Across villages, there are several instances of women challenging malfunctioning schools and school teachers for not performing. Certain practices like giving dowry and caste rules about eating etc have entered the ambit of discussion but are still deep-rooted prejudices and hence difficult to alter even though on an abstract level women recognise the need to counter them.



Interestingly, women collectively working towards ensuring better quality of education or organising to manage natural resources is often acceptable and garners support from men and the village community, as the 'other' in the former case is the state and its representatives and in the case of the latter men have no role or immediate stake in the absence of any direct responsibility. However, there is resistance and even strong protest on other fronts where there is direct conflict of interest or women's actions threaten entrenched social norms. For instance women protesting against alcohol abuse or challenging domestic violence has elicited strong reactions. Their active participation in the male bastion of electoral politics, acquiring positions of power and in other political bodies as citizens has been condemned and has created conflict.

It has been argued that women commonly tend to adopt subversive strategies of accommodation to counter patriarchal norms (Kandiyoti, 1988)²¹. In contrast, the regional federations in certain areas in recent years have used openly confrontational and public forms of protest such as *chakkajams* (blocking traffic), street marches, and campaigns outside local state institutions. In the village, women report instances of locking up men who were publicly indulging in abusive behaviour, waylaying men to check if they had been drinking before they enter the village, pouring water over groups of men gambling in public spaces. Over the years the authority of the WVGs has been - even if reluctantly - accepted in the villages, reflected in the fact that in many instances men comply and pay the fines imposed on them for abusive behaviour. Growing authority has enabled women to determine alternative trajectories to some extent such as challenging malpractice such as bribery in electoral politics.

It is evident that empowerment reflected in all the changes that have been discussed above has been drawn from the strength of the collective and also these changes were possible only through actions of the collective. The notion of

'empowerment' as relational is intrinsic to the women's groups and the role of the facilitators is critical as the emphasis was on creating spaces for the collectives to emerge. Eyben and Napier-Moore point out that in the contemporary discourse of international development agencies meanings of choice and decision-making have acquired an individualistic sense. They say, "The most common qualifiers for empowerment are economic and political. Development agencies have separated political and economic empowerment into different programmes, marginalising a political economy approach to the structural changes required for women's empowerment. The split has led to privileging a meaning of empowerment associated with formal institutions and individual autonomy. What is being crowded out are meanings of empowerment associated with solidarity and collective action." Batliwala (2007) argues how the meaning of 'empowerment' in India has shifted from when first employed by feminist activists in the 1980s to transformation in societal relations as the core to becoming a technical magic bullet of micro-credit programmes and political quotas for women. (Eyben and Napier-Moore, 2008: 24) On the one hand there have been arguments for focusing on power relations within the household and at the other end on the material and institutional constraints. However, the realm of the social has been underemphasised in this process which forms the crucial linkage between the private and the public. Women's political participation for instance in this case is clearly in continuum with their social experiences of collectivising which has helped them to acquire self-confidence, skills, capacity as well as aspiration. The USNPSS network enabled social and collective spaces with the consequence that challenging gender norms did not result in alienating them which often comes when there are attempts to cause sudden ruptures in everyday normative practices.

'Social Relations' is the primary framework within which women's needs are identified and

attempts are made to address them.²² A narrow view of addressing power relations within the household seems insufficient in this context. On being asked whether men help out with the job of collecting wood, one woman in a village meeting says, "Men have to do their jobs and labour, why will they come to the jungle with us, but they do cook and look after the children while we are gone. Ploughing is the only work done by men in the farms unlike some areas in Tehri Garhwal where women have started ploughing as well." Leela Devi from a village in Almora says, "I have studied up to high school and hence the villagers thought I was capable so they made me the treasurer when the group was formed in our village. I had wanted to contest for BDC member back then as well, but my husband who is a school teacher said that two people in the house cannot hold jobs together so I did not."



The movement from addressing practical to strategic gender needs²³ over the years has occurred but the agenda of achieving gender equity is enmeshed with women's attempts to achieve better quality of life. While they value their personal transformations, in most accounts the ability to be able to speak in public with confidence and deal with 'authority figures' is perceived by women to be significant because it enables them to achieve their developmental priorities. Some of them articulate the need for information for instance on legal matters or institutional procedures which they are currently unable to access. Women counter conflict and

resistance within the household as they start engaging with the wider network through support from other women in the village. Issues that have specific relevance to women's lives also have been prominent and are increasingly becoming a part of the discussion and the agenda. For instance, the increasing number of women in the villages whose husbands have left and not come back after migrating for work came up for discussion at a regional meeting. As some of the narratives indicate women's attempts at participating in *panchayat* activities and tackling domestic violence, issues that involve challenging dominant structures have evoked hostile reactions creating many more hurdles for them. This turmoil is reflected in actions like men not voting for a woman candidate from their village on the grounds that she is the 'daughter of the village', or rumours that were floated about there being a scarcity of rainfall in the region because 'women have started attending *gram sabha* meetings and becoming *pradhans*'. Alcohol abuse is an issue that women have been dealing with from the initial years which resulted in overt confrontations and illustrates that women were willing to take up contentious issues which were crucial to them even if it meant creating conflict.

Challenges and Opportunities

There is an apparent conflict of principles in several instances. For example, USNPSS does not directly encourage or support watershed management programmes as these do not necessarily respond to village level needs; yet a partner CBO may take up watershed projects with funding from other sources. Since the area of work and people the CBO is working with is the same, irrespective of where the funds are coming from, this kind of clash in views can be seen as a limitation. The most striking example is of some villages in Chamoli district where self help groups (SHGs)²⁴ and WVGs are operational in the same village facilitated by the same CBO as a part of their work with different organisations. So effectively in a village the same women are

presented with two options, which might appear contradictory to some women. The significant factor however is the regional meetings, group meetings within the village and trainings/meetings at Almora, all of which provide spaces to discuss these apparent contradictions. Women articulate their opinions and experiences and listen to others as well, not necessarily to always come to a consensus. The presence of more than one facilitator and consequently multiple visions may impose constraints but in-built processes of dialogue act as an antidote. Participatory processes, in the true sense, means that facilitators are open to the possibility that a consensus may not be achieved or the outcome may not always be in sync with initial objectives and ideological principles.

The following is an excerpt from a training held at Almora where women approximately 50 women from all across the state-different regions and villages participated along with CBO workers. On the first day, each woman introduced herself and narrated experiences of the women's group and their activities in their village, in some cases highlighting specific problems they have dealt with in the recent past. The second day was a more focussed discussion on experiences and problems of women who have been elected as ward members and *gram pradhans*. The issue of self help groups (*samooh*) and their utility came up during discussion.



WVGs State Level Meeting, Almora, August, 2009

An instance is narrated from a small village of 20 households in Pauri Garhwal. Seven women in the village formed a samooch (SHG), 2-3 of them belonged to very poor households and the others belonged to well-off households. The rich households borrowed Rs 35000 for buying cattle. A few days later worker from the NGO who runs the samooch went to recover the share of Rs 8000 from each household. The poor households simply could not afford to give that much money and it caused tremendous distress. They still have not been able to pay the money.

Someone says that samooch causes conflict in the village, in this case 13 households were left out and many of those who joined did so without accurate information or understanding on what it involved.

A woman from another village says that the sangathan was formed in their village only 2-3 months ago. There are 50 women in the village who are members of the sangathan. They perform mahila sangeet on weddings and other auspicious occasions. There is also a samooch in the village with 10-12 women who are members and collect money and take loans in times of need. She says that a samooch has its utility as well but only for women who have the capacity to contribute.

The facilitator poses a question ‘what is the need for a sangathan in a village if the samooch in the village is working well?’

Various answers emerge, “sangathan has the participation of all the women in the village and is meant for collective activities –like religious acts, constructing the dharamshala and the samooch is for rozi, roti. A discussion follows on whether religious activities like offering things at a temple contribute to solving any problems in the village or are more valuable than helping out those who are the weakest in the village...

Following is a discussion at a village meeting of the WVG in Kheti region, Almora district in the

presence of the CBO worker and USNPSS worker.

Village in Almora District

It is a small village with 12 households, all from the same caste. There are twenty women in the village and all are a part of the sangathan.

There is an organisation that has approached women in this village to start a self help group so that they have access to credit. A discussion follows on the differences between a samooch and a sangathan. One woman says “if 8-10 villages are doing it there must be something right about it”. The CBO worker says to the women, “it’s up to you whether you want to get involved or not, we can only give you information or clarify doubts if you have any”. One woman says that not all of us can afford to give Rs 50 in a month. We only started collecting savings last month in the sangathan, after eight years and that also a minimal amount of Rs 10 because everyone could afford it.

The former adhyaksha of the sangathan says, “I went for a meeting to Almora, and women from other villages were talking about the money they had collected and the utensils, and other things they had bought for communal use with that money. So I came back here and we discussed it at our meeting. We started collecting money so that we could buy big utensils for use by everyone at weddings and other occasions.”

The regional and state level meetings serve the purpose of creating linkages between locally specific concerns and broader issues through the interventions of the facilitator.

A discussion between the CBO worker and the women at a Regional meeting of women's groups (Ekta Mahila Parishad-regional federation) in a village in Dwarahat, Almora District May, 2009

There is a discussion on activities such as campaigns, mass protest that the Parishad actively carries out particularly through stopping traffic (chakkajams). The CBO worker says that it is important to be aware of laws and conduct protests and demand their right within its boundaries, so that no opportunity arises whereby they can be framed in complicated procedures of court cases etc. He cites the example of a rally that was held recently and the women did not inform the local administration in advance which is the rule. A chakkajam in Dwarahat was held by all the groups in the region, demanding that a solution be found to the problem of stray cattle as they were destroying crops in the fields.

The CBO worker flags the issue of exploring the root of the problem. There are households which have excess cattle due to breeding and taking care of them becomes difficult-gathering fodder, water is hard and also consumes time of the women in the household. So they let them loose because no one is willing to buy them. The CBO representative who is also a school teacher cites the example of a girl who regularly missed school once or twice a week as the number of cattle had increased and the mother could not take care of them alone. One of the women says that in her village they hired a boy to take all the extra cattle to the forest at a distance and let them loose but the cattle came back before the boys did. The CBO representative says that while holding protest and chakkajams, one should also try and understand the root of the problem to come up with specific solutions instead of just protesting. In this case since killing them goes against the diktats of our religion, they should ask that the government to open gau raksha kendras (cow shelters) where people can go and leave their cattle.



The interplay of the three levels is a counterbalancing act which ensures that no one set of objectives is dominant or imposed. Visions are not always in sync but are negotiated at all three levels and feed into each other. For instance, when USNPSS started working with women's groups, there was no plan or inclination to engage with politics and formal structures of *panchayats*. However the women in the villages started this process on their own and felt the need to enter the political system. Thus despite initial reluctance at USNPSS, they decided to support them and also get actively involved. The *balwadi* was the main preoccupation for the women in the initial years. Gradually plantation activity, protection of forests and water, protest against alcoholism entered the ambit of discussion and in recent years engagement with politics and state institutions has gained momentum. A critical factor is that views emerging from the women in the villages who are the primary actors in this process are valued and taken cognisance of. The structure of the meetings and trainings, illustrated by some of the excerpts above indicate an egalitarian space. Ideological principles are present, for instance USNPSS does not facilitate formation of self-help groups believing that they create conflict in the village²⁵, but the concept is being actively been promoted by other NGOs in the villages. The pros and cons of SHGs are discussed and the attempt is to raise issues, provide information and initiate discussion so that women can make an informed choice.

Women are also confronted with challenges emerging from a changing political, economic and social milieu. For instance, the proliferation of NGOs in the region leads to development interventions by different actors which are guided by differing and sometimes contradictory visions. This leads to questioning at the village level and also within the CBOs that are acquiring funds from different agencies. It is also noteworthy that funding through aid agencies is becoming a significant source of livelihood for educated youth in the region.



Whereas, women's narratives indicate that earlier the resistance to travelling to Almora for a meeting came from families on account of gender norms, now in several instances women leaders say that men and women expect material incentives, as that is the predominant trend in the functioning of the NGOs and the development sector. Basanti Devi adhyaksha of a village from Chamoli district says, "When I go for meetings, people in my village say that other villages are getting this, that and the other, what do we get? They tell me that you go to Almora-what do you get-nothing. Because of the NREGA, recently everyone has started expecting money for activities that we carried out voluntarily earlier as a group-like cleaning our own paths, *dhara, naula* (natural water bodies) –once I even put Rs 200-300 out of my own pocket in the fund just to inspire everyone. Now the women ask why they should work for free and waste their time, when earlier they cleared 3kms long path just like that".

Sarla Devi from Almora District says, "This is a problem in all villages, whether it is Kumaon or Garhwal - this thinking has become widespread". She also says people prefer to talk in their houses in small groups and sit in front of the television instead of all the women meeting as one group. "Even when there were no *sangathans*, people helped each other in the village just like that, now they want money for every hour of labour".

Through the course of discussions women have made linkages between issues that they deal with in their immediate context with broader issues which are beyond their control such as dependence on wood for fuel even as use of cooking gas is increasing in the villages but is unaffordable for most households; or even as women are making efforts to improve the quality of education in the village schools, households which can afford to move to towns do so to access better schooling for their children; or rising level of expectations as literacy rates are increasing is not matched by avenues for employment in the village; but often express their inability to do anything about these broader changes.

Apart from addressing these broader changes in the social, political and economic milieu of the rural landscape, the biggest challenge is to involve the whole village community including men specially as women are increasingly challenging practices such as domestic violence and actively threatening gendered power relations. As the agenda of gender relations is foregrounded, conflict at least initially will surface strongly and may have repercussions of creating divisions at the village level.

On an organisational level, funding in the development sector in the current scenario is largely attached to prescriptive objectives or measurable time bound outcomes and activities. Nanda Devi, a CBO worker says, "These days old Gandhian institutions like ours are not getting any funding, it is only going to project-based

NGOs but there is no feeling in that work. I understand these women because I was one of them. We do not give them anything-not even bags or pens like in other trainings-here we only share our thoughts, experiences and information.” Closure of *balwadis* as indicated in interviews with CBO workers means fewer numbers of workers and also a decrease in the frequency of visits to villages particularly those which are at greater distances from the CBO and not easily accessible. However, the UMP and the WVGs have acquired the status of credible institutions through their activities and word-of-mouth communication which aids the process of formation of new groups in villages.

USNPSS, CBOs and the village level groups have worked in tandem but visions and practices can and do conflict and this tension may be pronounced in a changing political, economic and social milieu particularly on account of the increasing presence of gender specific agenda of the UMP and also because of funding constraints. As CBOs take on projects from development agencies whose presence is rapidly increasing in the hill villages, at the village level programmes which embody different visions may create inconsistencies.

The meaning of ‘participation’ and conversely the role of ‘external intervention’ is difficult to conceptualise in the case of an endeavour like this where the objective is not service delivery or implementing income-generating projects. Need based activities and focus on awareness and information exchange involves not targeting a particular sphere of life but as in this instance encompasses the environment, social norms, state institutions and whatever else might fall in the ambit of that context. In the absence of material incentives ‘participation’ is not simply a desirable objective but the premise of the endeavour itself. Strategies have to constantly maintain the balancing act of working with the organisation’s ideological vision and guiding principles and not impinge on the premise of

participation. The nature of participation of women has evolved from engaging with activities to defining the agenda over the years. Efforts of facilitators in enhancing their capabilities through interactions with each other and the world ‘outside’ of the village as well as the ability to work as a collective and engage with institutions, practices, norms, has been critical in women being able to make this shift. Women’s role in defining the parameters of change and its pace is significant but it has come about over a period of time. The shift is also reflected in the simultaneous broadening of the vision of the organisation at the helm indicative of the fluidity of the role of ‘external’ and the centrality of community led nature of the intervention.



²⁰ Agarwal (2009) makes a similar observation in the case of community institutions of forest governance in India and Nepal that participation of older women is likely to increase the effectiveness of these institutions.

²¹ Kandiyoti (1988) elaborated on the concept of 'bargaining with patriarchy' to deconstruct the notion of patriarchy as the monolithic concept of male domination in feminist theory. She argues that the overarching concept of 'patriarchy' hinders rather than reveals sources of women oppression and subordination which are practiced in culturally specific ways. The rules of the game which women negotiate with in their everyday lives are context specific and an analysis of this process of negotiation with oppressive power relations in the household can lead to a more nuanced and holistic understanding of patriarchal structures. Patriarchal bargains determined by several identities of class, caste and ethnicity shape women's gendered subjectivity. These rules inform both women's rational choices and the less conscious aspects of their gendered subjectivities, because of which they adopt different strategies, either through resistance or collusion. In regions of North Africa, South and East Asia and the Muslim Middle East, where 'classic patriarchy' is operational with more corporate forms of households which are male-headed entities, women tend to adopt strategy of accommodation (1988).

²² Gender analysis in development planning has been primarily done within two frameworks-the 'gender roles' and 'social relations'. The gender roles framework focuses on division of labor and resources within the household. It identifies gender-based divisions in productive and reproductive work, and gender differences in access to and control over income and resources. The 'social relations' refers specifically to those dimensions of social relations that create differences in the positioning of men and women

in social processes. Social relations analysis brings the 'political' dimension to the core of its analysis. (Razavi & Miller, 1995)

²³ Moser distinguishes between strategic and practical gender needs drawing on Molyneux's distinction between practical and strategic gender interests (1985). Practical gender needs are the needs women identify in their socially accepted roles in society and area response to immediate perceived necessity, identified within a specific context. They are practical in nature and often are concerned with inadequacies in living conditions such as water provision, health care, and employment. Strategic gender needs are the needs women identify because of their subordinate position to men in society. They vary according to particular contexts and relate to gender divisions of labour, power and control and may include issues such as legal rights, domestic violence, equal wages and women control over their bodies. Meeting strategic gender needs helps women to achieve greater equality. It also changes existing roles and therefore challenges women's subordinate position. (Moser, 1993:39-40)

²⁴ The concept of SHG understood in its most widespread usage as "micro-credit based groups where women are brought together in order to access and repay loans as a collective". (Nirantar, 2007;Pg 4) SHG typically is a formation of a few women in the village, whereas the WVGs include all the women in the village.

²⁵ Pande (2007) (USNPSS staff) argues that micro-credit based groups divide the village community into smaller groups based on economic status, caste, residential location deepening existing inequalities and shift the development ethos from well-being to enterprise and hence from collective to individual agency. The whole village groups (provide an anti-thesis emphasising collective and integrated approach to gender and development.

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Glossary

Abhibhavak Goshtis	Meetings with mothers in the pre-primary centres with the teachers
Adhyaksha	President of the WVG in the village
Andolan	Campaign/Movement
Anganwadi	The Anganwadi is a childcare centre which is supposed to be located within the village or the slum area. It is the focal point for the delivery of services at community levels to children below six years of age, pregnant women, nursing mothers and adolescent girls. The ICDS Scheme is a centrally sponsored scheme for integrated programme of child development.
Awara	Derogatory term used to refer to someone of loose virtue
Balwadi	Pre-primary centers started by USNPSS for children in the age-group of 2-6 years
Barat	Wedding procession
Bhajans / Kirtan	Religious songs
Bhav geet	Songs accompanied by expressions taught to children in the balwadi
Bhavan	Building
Brahmins/Pandit	Upper caste group
Chakkajam	Blocking traffic as a form of protest
Chal Khals	Pits dug up on mountain slopes and forest for rain water harvesting
Chandni	Decorative tents used for weddings
Chetna Geet	Songs sung by women at meetings to generate enthusiasm
Chowkidar	Guard
Dharamshala	Rest house/Inn
Dharna	Form of collective protest
Gau Raksha Kendras	Cow Shelters

Gobar	Cow Dung
Gram Pradhan/Sarpanch	Chairperson of the of the elected village council (Panchayat)
Gram Sabha	General Body meeting of the village
Gudai	Weeding the crop
Holi	Festival where people play with colours
Jagrut	Aware
Karyakarta	Worker
Kishor/Kishori Sangathan	Adolescent boy/girls groups
Mahila Sangathan	Whole village women's groups
Mahila sangeet	Practice of women singing songs as a group at auspicious occasions in the village-weddings etc
Mahila Ekta Parishad	Regional Federations of the WVGs
Margdarshika	A supervisor who is a girl who has already run a <i>balwadi</i> for some time and is required to guide and direct the <i>shikshika</i> or the teacher in a few villages and monitor the functioning of the <i>balwadi</i> .
Naula/Dhara	Natural water bodies
Neta	Leader
Nukkad Natak	Street Play
Padyatra	Journey on foot for a specific cause or to spread awareness
Panchayat	Elected village Councils
Patwari	Revenue official/land record clerk
Block Pramukh	Head at the Block level
Rachnatmak Karya	Constructive/creative work

Roti	Bread
Rozi	Livelihood
Sachiv	Secretary
Sammelan	Meeting
Samooth	Group /collective Women use it for referring to Self Help groups
Sangathan	Group (Used by respondents to refer to the Whole Village women's groups)
Sanstha	Organisation
Shikshika	Teacher
Shramdan	Unpaid work done on a voluntary basis for creating collective goods
Tantra Vidya/ Jhaad Phoonk	Spiritual practices for curing illness
Tehsil	Administrative Unit consisting of a few villages
Tehsildar	Revenue Administrative Official
Thakurs	Upper caste group
Up-pradhan	Deputy chairperson of the village council
Yojana	Scheme usually refers to a government scheme

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