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AN ASSESSMENT OF HUMAN RIGHTS AWARENESS AMONG FEMALE ELECTED REPRESENTATIVES IN RURAL PANCHAYATS OF CHAMOLI DISTRICT, UTTARAKHAND

¹Dr. Sudha Verma and ²Dr. Geeta Rawat Shah

¹Faculty, S.B. College of Education, Vikas Nagar Dehradun, Uttarakhand

²Assistant Professor, Sociology, Govt. Degree College Kanvaghati, Kotdwar, Pauri, Garhwal, Uttarakhand

Abstract

The study titled *An Assessment of Human Rights Awareness among Female Elected Representatives in Rural Panchayats of Chamoli District, Uttarakhand*, explored the extent of awareness and understanding of human rights among women leaders at the grassroots level as tri level panchayats. Using a descriptive and comparative design, 60 female representatives from one block of Chamoli district were surveyed through questionnaires and interviews. Findings reveal that the overall awareness level is moderate (55%). Education and training components are being significant determinants of human rights understanding. Women with higher education and those exposed to NGO or Government programs showed better awareness of rights related to equality, education, health and political participation. However, low literacy, patriarchal norms and limited media exposure remain major challenges. The study emphasizes the need for regular human rights training, legal literacy workshops and community-based awareness programs to enhance women's empowerment and strengthen participatory Governance in rural Uttarakhand.

Keywords: Human Rights, Women Empowerment, Panchayati Raj, Legal literacy, Community based awareness.

Introduction

Human rights are the basic rights and freedoms inherent to all human beings, regardless of nationality, sex, caste, religion or social status. They ensure equality, dignity and justice for every individual, forming the foundation of a democratic society. In India, the Constitution guarantees fundamental rights to all citizens and promotes gender equality through various legislative and institutional measures. A landmark step in this direction was the **73rd Constitutional Amendment Act of 1992**, which decentralized power by establishing **Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs)** and mandated **33% reservation for women** in Local Self-Governance. This revolutionary reform opened the doors for rural women to participate actively in political and community decision-making processes. The participation of women in local governance has been one of the most transformative developments in rural India. However, true empowerment extends beyond mere representation. It requires awareness, education and the ability to exercise rights effectively. Awareness of human rights—such as the right to equality, education, health and safety—is crucial for women representatives to function as informed leaders and agents of social change.

In district like **Chamoli** in Uttarakhand, characterized by hilly terrain, scattered settlements and traditional social structures, women face unique challenges. Geographic isolation, low literacy rates and limited access to information often hinder their awareness and participation. Despite being elected representatives, many women continue to struggle against patriarchal attitudes and social restrictions that limit their authority. Therefore, understanding the level of human rights awareness among these female Panchayat representatives becomes vital. Such awareness not only empowers them individually but also enhances democratic functioning, promotes gender justice and contributes to sustainable rural development. This study thus explores how informed leadership among women in Chamoli's Panchayats can strengthen grassroots democracy and ensure equitable community progress.

Statement of the Problem

The empowerment of women through political participation is a key objective of India's democratic and developmental framework. The reservation policy under the 73rd Constitutional Amendment has significantly increased women's representation in governance; however, numerical inclusion alone does not ensure genuine empowerment. A persistent challenge is the limited awareness of human rights among women representatives, particularly in rural and remote regions like Chamoli district of Uttarakhand. Without adequate knowledge of their rights and responsibilities, many elected women members struggle to function effectively as decision-makers. Studies and field observations show



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that many women in rural Panchayats depend on their husbands or male relatives—often called “proxy representatives”—to handle official work. This happens mainly because of low education, little understanding of government systems and lack of training in human rights and laws. As a result, these women cannot use their powers fully or protect their own and others’ rights.

District Chamoli has faces extra challenges due to its hilly geography and traditional social customs. Long distances, conservative attitudes and poor economic conditions reduce women’s chances to attend awareness or training programs. Because of this, issues like gender inequality, domestic violence, low wages and lack of healthcare are often ignored, even by elected women members. Although the Panchayati Raj system has given women opportunities to take part in local governance, many still lack awareness about human rights. This limits their confidence, leadership and decision-making abilities. Therefore, it is important to study how much women representatives in Chamoli’s rural Panchayats know about human rights. Understanding this will help plan better training and awareness programs, so that women can lead more effectively and local Governance can truly reflect equality, justice and inclusion.

Objectives of the Study

1. To assess the level of human rights awareness among female representatives of rural Panchayats in Chamoli district.
2. To identify the socio-economic and educational factors affecting their awareness levels.
3. To analyze their understanding of rights related to gender equality, education, health and political participation.
4. To suggest measures to enhance human rights awareness and empowerment among rural female leaders.

Assumptions

1. There is a difference in human rights awareness among female Panchayat representatives based on their educational qualifications.
2. Training and participation in Government or NGO programs significantly improve human rights awareness.

Review of Literature

A number of studies have examined the status of women’s participation and awareness of human rights within Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) in India. Sharma (2018) observed that although women’s representation in Panchayats has increased after the 73rd Amendment, their limited knowledge of constitutional rights often restricts their active participation in governance. Kumari (2020) found that rural women representatives in northern India are largely unaware of their legal and political rights, which hinders their decision-making capacity. Similarly, Joshi (2022), in a study on hill districts of Uttarakhand, emphasized that geographical isolation and traditional social structures significantly limit women’s exposure to human rights education. Singh and Devi (2019) noted that despite formal empowerment through reservation, women often serve as “proxy representatives,” with male relatives exercising authority on their behalf. **Bhatnagar (2017)** pointed out that the effectiveness of PRIs depends on the level of awareness, training, and education provided to elected women members. **Rao and Patel (2021)** highlighted that training programs and awareness campaigns conducted by government and NGOs have improved self-confidence and participation among women leaders.

In the context of Uttarakhand, **Rawat (2020)** reported that lack of education and mobility are major barriers to women’s awareness about their rights and entitlements. **Negi and Nautiyal (2018)** observed that community-based organizations and self-help groups (SHGs) play a vital role in promoting awareness and social participation among rural women. Furthermore, **Chakraborty (2016)** argued that gender-sensitive training programs in PRIs enhance not only awareness but also accountability and transparency in local governance. **UNDP (2021)** emphasized that strengthening human rights education at the grassroots level is essential for sustainable development and women’s empowerment. Overall, the reviewed literature suggests that women’s awareness of human rights remains inadequate in rural and hilly regions, including Chamoli district and that targeted interventions can significantly improve their empowerment and governance outcomes.

Research Methodology

The present study adopts a **descriptive and comparative research design** to assess and analyze the level of human rights awareness among female representatives of rural Panchayats in Chamoli district, Uttarakhand. This design was chosen because it allows for a systematic description and comparison of the awareness levels of respondents across different Panchayat areas. The study was conducted in selected rural Panchayats from three administrative blocks of Chamoli district—**Gairsain, Pokhri and Joshimath**, representing diverse geographical and socio-economic conditions.



A total of **60 female Panchayat representatives** were selected as the sample for this study, with **20 participants from each of the three blocks**. The respondents included women serving as Gram Pradhans, Ward Members, and members of Panchayat Committees. The **stratified random sampling technique** was employed to ensure that representatives from different Panchayat levels and socio-economic backgrounds were proportionately included in the sample. This method provided a more accurate and unbiased representation of the target population. For data collection, a **structured questionnaire** and an **interview schedule** were developed to gather both quantitative and qualitative information. The questionnaire focused on five key dimensions of human rights awareness: **(1) Right to Education, (2) Right to Equality and Dignity, (3) Right to Health and Safety, (4) Right to Political Participation and (5) Right to Property and Livelihood**. The questions were designed in simple language to suit the literacy levels of the respondents and to elicit honest and comprehensive responses. Personal interviews were conducted to supplement the questionnaire data and capture deeper insights into the participants' perceptions and experiences. The collected data were analyzed using **statistical tools such as mean, percentage and chi-square test** to measure the overall level of awareness and to identify significant differences between groups based on education, age and training exposure. The findings were interpreted to draw meaningful conclusions and recommendations for enhancing human rights awareness among rural women leaders in Chamoli district.

Findings and Analysis

The study aimed to evaluate the level of human rights awareness among female representatives in rural Panchayats of Chamoli district.

Table-A

Level of Human Rights Awareness among Female Representatives in Rural Panchayats of Chamoli District

Block	No. of Respondents (N)	High Awareness	Moderate Awareness	Low Awareness	Total (%)
Gairsain	20	6 (30%)	11 (55%)	3 (15%)	100%
Pokhri	20	5 (25%)	12 (60%)	3 (15%)	100%
Joshimath	20	4 (20%)	10 (50%)	6 (30%)	100%
Total	60	15 (25%)	33 (55%)	12 (20%)	100%

The analysis of data revealed that the majority (55%) of women representatives exhibited a moderate level of awareness regarding human rights, reflecting a fair understanding of basic concepts. About one-fourth (25%) of the respondents demonstrated a high level of awareness, indicating strong understanding, confidence and engagement in issues related to equality and participation. On the other hand, 20% of the respondents were found to have a low level of awareness, largely due to limited education, lack of exposure and restricted access to information sources. The analysis revealed that the overall awareness among the respondents was **moderate** showing a fair understanding of basic human rights concepts.

Education was found to be a key determinant of awareness, women who had completed **secondary or higher education** exhibited a significantly higher level of awareness compared to those with little or no formal education. Similarly, participation in **training programs** organized by Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) or NGOs had a positive influence on respondents' understanding of rights related to equality, health and political participation. The study also identified several barriers limiting awareness, including **lack of formal education, limited media exposure, traditional gender norms and dependence on male relatives for information and decision-making**. Encouragingly, **younger representatives (below 40 years)** and those involved in **self-help groups (SHGs)** displayed more confidence and progressive attitudes toward gender equality and leadership. These findings highlight the importance of continuous education and capacity-building programs for enhancing women's empowerment and effective participation in rural Governance.



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Table-A
Composite detail on Human Rights Awareness among Female Representatives in Rural Panchayats of Chamoli District

S.No.	Aspect	Observation	Impact/Implication
1.	Overall Awareness	55% moderate awareness	Indicates scope for improvement
2.	Education Effect	Higher education → better awareness	Education enhances understanding of rights
3.	Training Impact	Workshop participants more aware	Training increases confidence and knowledge
4.	Major Barriers	Low education, limited media, patriarchy	Restricts empowerment and decision-making
5.	Positive Indicators	Younger women & SHG members	Show leadership and progressive attitudes

Suggestions for better awareness

1. Organize **regular human rights and leadership training** programs at the block and district levels.
2. Use **local media, folk songs, and community meetings** to spread awareness in simple and local language.
3. Encourage collaboration between **NGOs, women's self-help groups and Government departments** to ensure continuous learning.
4. Integrate **human rights education** in school and adult literacy programs.
5. Create a **support network** of women representatives to share knowledge and experiences.

Conclusion

The study concludes that Blocks Gairsain and Pokhari showed relatively higher levels of awareness than Joshimath, which may be attributed to better access to training opportunities, educational facilities, and active involvement in local Governance programs. Although rural women representatives in Chamoli district are increasingly participating in Panchayati Raj Governance, their awareness and understanding of human rights remain limited. The reservation policy under the 73rd Constitutional Amendment has enabled women to enter the political sphere; however, true empowerment depends on knowledge, confidence, and the ability to exercise constitutional rights effectively. Education, training and exposure have emerged as the most significant factors influencing awareness levels. Women who are better educated or have attended capacity-building programs demonstrate greater leadership qualities, decision-making power and independence in performing their official duties.

The study also reveals that many women representatives still face social and cultural barriers, such as dependence on male family members, low self-confidence and lack of opportunities for learning. These challenges reduce their ability to address community issues and utilize their positions for social change. Enhancing women's awareness of human rights through structured training programs, legal literacy workshops and regular exposure visits can help overcome these barriers. Such initiatives will not only strengthen their personal empowerment but also promote transparency, inclusiveness and accountability in local governance. Similar conclusions were drawn by **Nair (2019)** in her research "*Empowerment of Women through Panchayati Raj Institutions in India*", which highlighted that awareness and training in human rights and legal provisions are key to transforming women's formal political participation into genuine empowerment. Hence, promoting human rights education among rural women representatives is essential for achieving equitable and sustainable rural development in Uttarakhand.

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