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Information Seeking Behaviour of Opinion Leaders in Hill Region of Uttarakhand

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ABSTRACT

The main objective of the investigation was to study the information seeking behaviourof opinion leaders along with their socio-economic and personal characteristics identified among the farm women in hill regions of Uttarakhand state. The study was carried out in two hill district, Bageshwar from Kumaon division and Tehri Garhwal from Garhwal division. The investigation was confined to total 298 respondents, 177 farm women from village *Badiyakot* of Bageshwar district and 121 farm women from village *Sabli Talli* of Tehri Garhwal district selected purposively. Data were collected through semi-structured interview schedule. The findings revealed that majority of the opinion leaders belonged to middle age category, married, educated up to primary school and belonged to upper caste. Agriculture was found to be the primary occupation of all the opinion leaders. About more than half of the opinion leaders *i.e.,* 54.17 per cent were noted to be engaged in animal husbandry followed by 20.83 per cent engaged in poultry farming as secondary occupation. Majority of the opinion leaders had medium years of farming experience. The study alsorevealed that majority of the respondents had medium socio-economic status andinformation seeking behavior. However,localite sources of information were more frequently utilized by opinion leaders as compared to cosmopolite sources, mass media sources and extension education methods.

Key Words: Communication network, Farm women, Information seeking behaviour, Key communicators, Opinion leaders.

INTRODUCTION

In agriculture and related subjects farmers rely much on their fellow farmers. They believe that, fellow farmers are more capable to give suggestions based on their practical knowledge and experience (Jyothi and Kumar, 2013). So, whenever extension personnel are to disseminate information to the farming community it is always beneficial to disseminate it through these few significant farmers.

Agricultural extension work in the rural areas is, greatly facilitated when extension functionaries utilizes these fellow farmers or simply called as opinion leaders in planning, implementation and evaluation of extension educational programmes. Extension programmes receives greater acceptance and participation of the people, when their leaders are involved in these programmes. These informal leaders besides addressing end to end issues are effective in providing required backward-forward linkages. Moreover, it is difficult to channelize the information from one extension personnel to 1500 farmers in a stipulated time; this shortage of extension personnel could be filled by trained communicators. Hence, these key communicators come in a way of disseminating the agricultural information in time to large number of farmers. Their beliefs, values, experiences, opinions, self-commitment etc. directly or indirectly affect the decision-making behavior of others and thereby, initiates change. These are the individuals who play a significant role in initiating, directing and sustaining social change in rural development.

The diffusion of innovations through opinion leaders facilitates the active participation of local farmers and validates the innovation through time. Apart from these, opinion leaders also play

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key roles, such as to evaluate innovations, keep communication among the networks, facilitate the opportunities for agricultural projects and training, and create and maintain contacts with external organizations. Therefore, as recommended by Oleas *et al* (2010), the diffusion of information and innovation through formal and non-formal leaders represents a promising strategy for any development programmes. Hence, the importance of utilizing opinion leaders to support the development process of any programme is emphasized across many development scenarios (Oleas *et al*, 2010). In the present study, total twenty four opinion leaders were identified from the two villagesbased on their high in-degree centrality scores (total nominations) in the delineated communication networks of farm women in the two village *viz.,.* village *Badiyakot* and village *Sabli Talli* respectively. However, understanding the socio-economic and personalcharacteristics of opinion leaders is the first and foremost step towards the integration of opinion leaders into the development process. Therefore, the socio-economic and personal characteristics along with the information seeking behaviour of opinion leaders identified among the farm women using network centrality has been studied as part of the research investigation.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The present study was carried out in two hill district of Uttarakhand state, Bageshwar from Kumaon division and Tehri Garhwalfrom Garhwal division selected using simple random sampling. The investigation was confined to total 298 respondents, 177 farm women from village *Badiyakot* of Bageshwar district and 121 farm women from village *Sabli Talli* of Tehri Garhwal district selected purposively based on following criteria for selection:

1. Farm women who were extensively involved in agriculture and allied activities
2. Farm women who were over the age of eighteen years and above

Descriptive research design was used for conducting the research study. Data were collected through semi-structured interview schedule. SPSS programme has been used for data analysis and drawing relevant conclusions. The information seeking behaviour of the opinion leaders were studied on four categories described below included in Bhairamkar (2009) scale used for present investigation with slight modifications.A detailed discussion of the socio-economic and personal characteristics along with the information seeking behaviour of the identified opinion leaders has been presented under the following section:

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Socio-economic and personal characteristics of opinion leaders

Age

The findings regarding age composition of the opinion leaders revealed that maximum percentage of the opinion leaders (58.33%) were in the middle age category (35.69 to 51.97) followed by 25 per cent of opinion leaders who belonged to young age category (less than 35.69) respectively. Only 16.67 per cent of opinion leaders were in the older age category (more than 51.97). This shows that opinion leaders in the study area were generally those who were on one hand experienced in farming and in the other hand were actively engaged in social activities. This may be due to the reason that this age group of hill women participate actively in all social and political activities as most of the male population migrated to other areas for employment.

Education

Opinion leaders were found to be not highly educated in the sampled villages.Most (41.67%) of the opinion leaders were educated up to primary level followed by nearly one third (33.33%) of opinion leaders who can only read and write. Further, about 20.83 per cent of opinion leaders were educated up to middle school and very few among them (4.17%) had high school as educational

Table 1. Distribution of opinion leaders on the basis of their socio-economic and personal characteristics (n=24)

Sr.No.	Characteristic	Percentage (%)	Mean	Standard deviation
a	**Age**			
	Young (Less than 35.69 yr)	25.00	43.83	8.138
	Middle (35.69 to51.97 yr)	58.33		
	Old (More than 51.97 yr)	16.67		
b	**Marital Status**			
	Unmarried	16.67	NA	NA
	Married	83.33		
	Divorce	0.00		
	Widow	0.00		
c	**Education**			
	Illiterate	0.00	NA	NA
	Can read only	0.00		
	Can read and write	33.33		
	Primary	41.67		
	Middle	20.83		
	High school	4.17		
	Graduate	0.00		
	Post graduate	0.00		
d	**Occupation**			
	None	12.50	NA	NA
	Wage earner/Labour	0.00		
	Animal husbandry	54.17		
	Poultry farming	20.83		
	Service	4.17		
	Business	8.33		
e	**Farming experience**			
	Low (Less than 23.37)	16.67	31.04	7.664
	Medium (23.37 to38.70)	66.66		
	High (More than 38.70)	16.67		
f	**Socio-economic status**			
	Low (Less than 92.37)	8.33	107.04	14.669
	Medium (92.37 to121.71)	70.84		
	High (More than 121.71)	20.83		

*NA: Not Applicable **Total Number of Opinion Leaders: 24

status respectively. None of them were illiterate or had higher educational qualification as graduate or post graduate.

Marital status

The composition of opinion leaders based on their marital status showed that majority of the

opinion leaders (83.33%) were married followed by the remaining 16.67 per cent of opinion leaders who were unmarried. None among them were divorced or widow. Married farm women were assumed to be more respectable than unmarried or divorce or widow in the sampled villages.

Occupation of opinion leaders

Occupation is an important determinant of the lifestyle and the class status of an individual. Agriculture was the primary occupation of all the opinion leaders. The data showed that maximum percentage of opinion leaders (54.17%) were into animal husbandry followed by 20.83 per cent of the opinion leaders who were engaged in poultry farming. About 12.50 per cent of the opinion leaders were involve in none as secondary occupation. Further, 8.33 per cent of opinion leaders were engaged in business in the respective village.

Farming experience

The composition of opinion leaders based on their farming experience cleared out that majority (66.66%) of opinion leaders had medium farming experience i.e. between 23.37 to 38.70. While equal percentages of opinion leaders i.e. 16.67 per cent had low (less than 23.37%) and high (more than 38.70%) farming experience respectively.

Socio-economic status

The socio-economic status of women is a critical factor which determines her social influence and importance. The distribution of opinion leaders according to their socio-economic status pointed out that majority of opinion leaders (70.84%) belonged to medium socio-economic status followed by 20.83 per cent who belonged to high socio-economic status respectively. Only 8.33 per cent of the opinion leaders were from low socio-economic status.

Information seeking behaviour from personal localite sources

Data (Table 20 represented the distribution of opinion leaders according to their frequency of seeking information from personal localite sources. The data inferred that majority of the opinion leaders (58.33%) sought information from fellow opinion leaders or other local leaders on regular basis. One-fourth (25%) of the opinion leaders sought information from neighbours and progressive farm women of the villages. It was found that exactly fifty per cent (50%) of the opinion leaders sought information from friends followed by neighbours (41.67%) on occasional basis. It was suggested that for seeking agricultural information fellow local leaders, neighbours and friends were perceived as the most frequently sought personal localite sources in the area under study. Thus, local leaders were the most preferred sources of information followed by neighbours, friends, progressive farmers and relatives for the opinion leaders.

The data (Table 3) showed that more than fifty per cent of the opinion leaders (54.17%) had medium level of information seeking behaviour from personal localite sources followed by 25 per cent of the opinion leaders who had low level of information seeking behaviour from personal localite sources. Around 20.83 per cent of opinion leaders had high level of information seeking behaviour from personal localite sources. It was concluded that most of the opinion leaders had medium level of information seeking behaviour and used localite sources like local leaders, friends, progressive farmers and relatives as sources of information. The reason behind this degree of dependency for information might be explained by the fact that local leaders were more exposed to the sources of agricultural information from outside sources as compared to rest of the personal localite sources. The opinion leaders played the role of reservoirs of knowledge for the rest of the farm women but their own sources of information were not confined to the boundaries of the villages as was the case of the rest of the respondents.

Information seeking behaviour from personal cosmopolite sources

The data in Table 2represented the distribution

of opinion leaders according to their frequency of seeking information from personal cosmopolite sources. It indicated that among personal cosmopolite sources, NGOs personnel were most frequently sought by the opinion leaders (100%). KVK-SMS were the second most frequently sought information sources (95.83%) followed by *Gram Sewak*, Block Development Officer, Agricultural Officer and Agricultural Officer (Bank) occupying corresponding 3rd, 4th, 5thand 6thranks respectively. It suggests that for seeking agricultural information, NGO personnel and KVK-SMS were perceived as the most frequently sought personal cosmopolite sources by the opinion leaders in the study area. It can be clearly noted that the opinion leaders were far more dependent on the NGOs and KVK-SMS for the perusal of information related to agriculture as compared to personal localite sources. This finding revealed that unlike other farm women who were dependent more on localite sources, the opinion leaders happened to be relying more on personal cosmopolite sources.

Data regarding information seeking behaviour from personal cosmopolite sources is presented in Table 3. It is evident that majority of the opinion leaders (75%) had high level of information seeking behaviour from personal cosmopolite sources followed by 16.67 per cent of opinion leaders who had medium level of information seeking behaviour from personal cosmopolite sources. Only 8.33 per cent of opinion leaders showed low level of information seeking behaviour from personal cosmopolite sources. From informal discussions, it was found that, although extension personnel or experts conducted occasional field visits in villages due to lack of transportation facilities and field staff, they had informally appointed these opinion leaders as their contact persons for exchange of information related to agriculture. Also, at times, the opinion leaders approached these experts/ extension personnel with the help of the male members of the village and helped to create an information flow between village and extension agencies, i.e. conveying problems to the experts and bringing solutions to the villages. Thus, opinion leaders acted as a link between the village community and outer extension agencies, such as NGO, KVK etc.

Information seeking behaviour from mass media sources

Data in Table 2representedthat television and radio were sought on regular basis by most of the opinion leaders i.e. 50 and 41.67 per cent respectively followed by 25 per cent of opinion leaders who used to seek information from mobile phones regularly. It was also revealed that on an occasional basis, 33.33 per cent and 25 per cent of opinion leaders seek information from radio and television respectively. While on occasional basis, mobile phones and newspaper were sought for information by 20.83 per cent and 12.50 per cent of opinion leaders. Thus, television and radio were most frequently sought for agricultural information followed by mobile phones, newspaper and magazines respectively.The above findings showed a distinguishing picture from that of the case of total respondents, where mobile phones were among the most frequently used mass media source for agricultural information. This change in findings may be explained by the fact that more of the opinion leaders belonged to old-aged category and thus, they found it less convenient to use mobile phones and thus, were stuck to radio for accessing agricultural information.

The data in Table 3 indicated that more than fifty per cent (54.17%) of the opinion leaders belonged to medium category followed by about 29.16 per cent of opinion leaders who belonged to low category of information seeking behaviour from mass media sources. Only 16.67 per cent of opinion leaders belonged to high category of information seeking behaviour from mass media sources. It can be concluded that people in rural areas were using mass media sources to a less extent with television, radio and mobile phones as the commonly used mass media. In spite of the fact that in hill regions, interpersonal channels of communication are more readily available and utilized as information sources

Table 2. Distribution of opinion leaders according to their frequency of seeking Information. (n=24)

Sr.No	Information Source	Regular	Occasionally	Never	Weighted mean score (WMS)	Rank
		%	No.			
a.	**Personal localite sources**					
1	Local leaders	58.33	25.00	16.67	2.41	I
2	Neighbours	25.00	41.67	33.33	1.91	II
3	Friends	16.67	50.00	33.33	1.83	III
4	Progressive farmers	25.00	16.67	58.33	1.67	IV
5	Relatives	8.33	16.67	75.00	1.33	V
b.	**Personal cosmopolite sources**					
1	Personnel of NGO	100	00	00	3.00	I
2	KVK-Subject Matter Specialists (SMS)	95.83	4.17	00	2.95	II
3	Gram Sewak	62.50	37.50	00	2.62	III
4	Block Dev. Officer (BDO)	00	20.83	79.17	1.20	IV
5	Agriculture Officer(AO)	00	16.67	83.33	1.17	V
6	Agriculture Officer (Bank)	00	12.50	87.50	1.12	VI
c.	**Mass media sources**					
1	Television	50.00	25.00	25.00	2.25	I
2	Radio	41.67	33.33	25.00	2.16	II
3	Mobile phones	25.00	20.83	54.17	1.70	III
4	Newspaper	8.33	12.50	79.17	1.29	IV
5	Farm magazine	0.00	8.33	91.67	1.08	V
d.	**Extension education methods**					
1	Training programmes	100.00	0.00	0.00	3.00	I
2	Field trial	95.83	4.17	0.00	2.95	II
3	Demonstration	91.67	8.33	0.00	2.91	III
4	Meetings	87.50	12.50	0.00	2.87	IV
5	Kisan mela	83.33	16.67	0.00	2.83	V

*Multiple responses were allowed

as compared to mass media sources; mass media sources were perceived as useful by a significant number of opinion leaders in the study area.

Information seeking behaviour from extension education methods

From the data (Table2), it can be inferred that

opinion leaders in the study area most frequently sought information during training programmes (100%) followed by field trials (95.83%), demonstration (91.67%), meetings (87.50%) and *kisan mela* (83.33%). The data in Table 3 showed that majority i.e. 66.67 per cent of opinion leaders belonged to high category followed by about 20.83 per cent of opinion leaders who belonged to medium category of seeking agricultural information through extension education methods. Only 12.50 per cent of opinion leaders were found to be in low category of information seeking behaviour from extension methods. This indicated that majority of the opinion leaders have high dependence on extension methods for seeking information. This might be due to the reason that opinion leaders, being the connecting links between the village and extension agencies actively participated in extension activities carried out by the extension agencies.

Table 3. Distribution of opinion leaders on the basis of their information seeking behaviour from various sources. (n=24)

Sr. No.	Source of Information Seeking	Percentage
a.	**Personal localite**	
1.	Low (Less than 6)	25.00
2.	Medium (In between 6 to 9)	54.17
3.	High (More than 9)	20.83
b.	Personal cosmopolite	
1.	Low (Less than 3)	8.33
2.	Medium (In between 3 to 9)	16.67
3.	High (More than 9)	75.00
c.	Mass media	
1.	Low (Less than 3)	29.16
2.	Medium (In between 3 to 8)	54.17
3.	High (More than 8)	16.67
d.	Extension education methods	
1.	Low (Less than 3)	12.50
2.	Medium (In between 4 to 9)	20.83
3.	High (More than 9)	66.67

Overall information seeking behaviour from various sources

Data regarding overall information seeking behaviour of the opinion leaders is presented in the Table 4. The data exhibits that maximum percentage of the opinion leaders (58.33%) had medium level of information seeking behavior followed by equal proportion of opinion leaders who had high and low (20.83%) levels of information seeking behavior behaviour.

From the findings it was observed that most of the opinion leaders sought information about farming from personal cosmopolite sources such as personnel from NGOs and KVKs active in the study area. Local leaders, among personal localite sources were considered a trustworthy source of information for a major proportion of opinion leaders. The results show a clear picture that the opinion leaders acted as a bridge between the village and extension agencies. From informal discussions, it was also revealed that opinion leaders with the help of male members created a flow of information exchange between villagers and the extension agencies. The findings also revealed that opinion leaders actively participated in the training programmes, demonstrations, field trials meetings and other extension activities and helped disseminate the obtained information and leanings to the fellow farm women.

Interestingly, there also existed a fair difference in the findings related to overall respondents and opinion leaders in particular, in context of information seeking behavior. The difference laid in choice of information sources, the media and extension methods used for obtaining agriculture-related information. The overall exploration indicated that the agriculture-related information was first obtained by opinion leaders predominately through personal cosmopolite sources and mass media sources. Thereafter, it was transmitted to the rest of farm women for whom these opinion leaders acted as personal localite sources of obtaining agriculture-related information. In the same manner,

Table 4. Distribution of opinion leaders on the basis of their overall information seeking behaviour from various sources. (n=24)

Overall Information seeking behavior			
Sr.No.	**Category**	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
1	Low (Less than 10)	5	20.83
2	Medium (In between 10 to 26)	14	58.34
3	High (More than 26)	5	20.83

the problems of farm women related to agriculture were communicated to extension agencies through opinion leaders. Thus, they act as a connecting link between the two sides. Based on the above analysis of the information seeking behavior and informally-existing pattern of information flow might be utilized to form a sound communication strategy by utilizing all the available resources.

CONCLUSION

It can be concluded that majority (62.40%) of opinion leaders belonged to middle age category i.e. to the age group of 36 to 52, were married (83.33%), educated up to primary school (41.67%), belonged to upper caste (79.16%) and had joint family (79.17%) with 66.66 per cent of opinion leaders having medium family size (7 to 10 members) respectively. Agriculture was found to be the primary occupation of all the opinion leaders (100%). About more than half of the opinion leaders i.e. 54.17 per cent performed animal husbandry followed by 20.83 per cent who were engaged in poultry farming as secondary occupation. Majority of the opinion leaders (66.66%) had medium years of farming experience i.e. between 23 to 39. Further, it was also observed that majority of the respondents (70.84%, 70.84%) had medium socio-economic status and information seeking behavior. It was realized that opinion leaders utilized localite source of information more frequently as compared to cosmopolite sources, mass media sources and extension education methods.

It is important to note that the present study was conducted in the isolated and remote villages of hill district of Uttarakhand state which is particularly unparalleled in terms of geo-topographical and cultural dimensions. As a consequence, this uniqueness in the situational factors might have influenced the differences in the findings. This calls for future researchers to study this phenomenon with more intensity and depth in order to throw more light on the related aspects. The present investigation has its primary focus on opinion leaders, and somehow has ignored the non-opinion leaders. Therefore, future studies which includes non- opinion leaders as well as made significant differences in characteristics of opinion leaders and non-opinion leaders need to be studied exhaustively for a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under study.

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