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Empowering Women Farmers through Community-Driven Agriculture: A Case Study of the Gauri Self-Help Group and One Village One Farm Initiative in Uttarakhand, India

Manasvi Barthwal

Pt. L.M.S Campus Rishikesh, Sri Dev Suman Uttarakhand University

*Corresponding Author's email Id: barthwal111manasvi@gmail.com

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Abstract: Women farmers in India's hilly regions face systemic barriers yet are critical to rural economies. This study examines the Gauri Self-Help Group (SHG)'s One Village One Farm (OVOF) initiative in Gaurikot, Uttarakhand, a women-led model integrating vegetable, poultry, fishery, and pulse farming to foster economic and social empowerment. Using financial data (2014–2017) and stakeholder interviews, we find that the initiative increased annual profits from ₹67,000 to ₹544,700 (CAGR ~100%), raised individual incomes from ₹2,000–3,000 to ₹6,000–7,000 monthly, and expanded land use from 10 to 129 Nali. Social benefits included reduced migration and improved education, while organic practices enhanced sustainability. Post-COVID-19 income drops to ₹3,000–4,000 highlight vulnerabilities. The study contributes to the literature by analyzing integrated farming's resilience in hilly terrains, offering policy insights for scaling women-led agricultural models.

Keywords: Women's empowerment; Self-Help Groups; Integrated farming; Uttarakhand; Rural development; Sustainability

Introduction

In India, women constitute nearly half of the agricultural workforce, yet their contributions are often constrained by limited resource access and patriarchal norms, particularly in hilly regions like Uttarakhand (Agarwal 2018). Uttarakhand's rugged terrain and high male outmigration (27.8% of households with migrants) amplify women's roles in agriculture, necessitating innovative models for empowerment (IndiaSpend 2023). The Gauri Self-Help Group (SHG), formed in June 2013 in Gaurikot village, Pauri District, implemented the One Village One Farm (OVOF) initiative to address unemployment and migration through integrated farming, including off-season vegetables, poultry, fisheries, and pulses.

This study investigates the OVOF initiative's economic, social, and environmental impacts, addressing the research question: How does a women-led integrated farming model empower farmers and foster sustainable rural development in hilly regions? Using financial data (2014–2017) and stakeholder interviews from Barthwal (2025), we analyze profit growth, income changes, and resilience post-COVID-19. The study contributes to the literature by examining a multi-activity SHG model in Uttarakhand's unique agro-ecological context, offering scalable insights for gender-inclusive agricultural policy.

Literature Review

Self-Help Groups (SHGs) are pivotal for women's empowerment in rural India, fostering economic independence, social inclusion, and sustainable development (Brody et al. 2017). Studies from 2017 to 2024 highlight SHGs' impacts, particularly in agriculture-based contexts like Uttarakhand.

Economic Empowerment: SHGs significantly increase household income through microfinance and entrepreneurial activities. Bhardwaj and Gebrehiwot (2019) found that SHGs in Uttarakhand's Nainital district raised incomes by 20–30%, aligning with Gauri SHG's income growth from ₹2,000–3,000 to ₹6,000–7,000 monthly. Kumar et al. (2021) reported a 20% agricultural income rise across five states, including Uttarakhand, attributing it to collective action. Diversified activities enhance profitability, with Nayak et al. (2019) noting 30–40% higher profits in multi-activity SHGs, as seen in Gauri's pulse and poultry contributions (₹139,500 and ₹90,000 in 2017).

Social Impacts: SHGs improve decision-making and mobility but face cultural barriers. Khan et al. (2020) observed 60% of SHG women in Kashmir gained social empowerment, similar to Gauri's reduced migration and educational advancements. Rawat and Rawat (2024) reported 90% of Pithoragarh SHG members increased family income, supporting Gauri's community hall and educational outcomes. However, political empowerment remains limited (Maity 2024), suggesting Gauri's infrastructure investments may not fully address leadership gaps.

Sustainability and Challenges: SHGs promote organic farming and diversification, contributing to sustainable development goals (Ghosh et al. 2023). Hossain et al. (2022) noted 100% income increases in Odisha through agricultural SHGs, mirroring Gauri's CAGR of ~100%. Market access and environmental risks (e.g., wild boars) limit scalability (Ghosh et al. 2024), relevant to Gauri's post-COVID income drop to ₹3,000–4,000.

Research Gap: While studies address SHG impacts broadly, few focus on integrated farming models in hilly terrains like Uttarakhand, particularly their resilience post-economic shocks. The Gauri SHG's multi-activity approach, with exponential profit growth and diversified land use (129 Nali by 2017), offers a novel case to address this gap, informing policies for sustainable rural development.

Methodology

Study Area: Gaurikot village, Wajali, Pauri Garhwal, spans 369.22 hectares with 849 residents (418 males, 431 females) across 203 households. With 83.88% literacy (male: 98.8%, female: 69.9%) and 59 cultivators among 297 workers, agriculture dominates (Barthwal 2025). Hilly terrain and migration pose challenges, making the OVOF initiative critical.

Data Sources: Primary Data: Semi-structured interviews with SHG spokesperson Anil Rawat and members (e.g., Rekha Devi), conducted telephonically, providing insights into economic and social impacts.

Secondary Data: Financial records (2014–2017) detailing project costs, profits, and land use, supplemented by government reports and village demographics.

Analytical Approach: Quantitative Analysis: Profit trends, Return on Investment (ROI), and Compound Annual Growth Rate (CAGR) were calculated. Descriptive statistics summarized income and land use changes. Outcomes were benchmarked against Uttarakhand's per capita income (₹2,710; Business Standard 2022).

Qualitative Analysis: Thematic coding of interviews identified economic empowerment, social cohesion, and sustainability themes. Pauri's SHG ecosystem (Lakhpati Didi Scheme) was compared to regional trends. Data are limited to 2014–2017, with qualitative post-COVID-19 insights. Future research could include longitudinal data to assess long-term impacts.

Results

The Gauri SHG's OVOF initiative achieved significant economic, social, and environmental outcomes, as detailed in Tables 1 and 2.

Table 1: Annual Project Costs, Profits, and Land Use (2014–2017)

Year	Project Costs (₹)	Key Investments	Annual Profits (₹)	ROI (%)	Land Used (Nali)	Key Funding Sources
2014	1,160,000	Irrigation (₹500,000), Poultry (₹370,000)	67,000	5.78	10 (Vegetables)	ICDP, Agriculture, Minor Irrigation
2015	282,000	Poly Houses (₹120,000), Fish Pond (₹90,000)	159,500	56.56	25 (Vegetables)	World Vision, Agriculture, SHG
2016	445,000	Fish Pond (₹300,000), Infrastructure (₹100,000)	293,400	65.93	52 (Vegetables, Pulses, Flowers)	Fisheries Dept., NREGA, SHG
2017	1,200,000	Bamboo Huts (₹600,000), Krishi Bhawan (₹500,000)	544,700	45.39	129 (Vegetables, Pulses, Flowers, Bamboo)	Pauri Block, NREGA, Jila Nawachaar Nidhi

Economic Performance: Project costs fluctuated, peaking at ₹1,200,000 (2017) for eco-tourism and community infrastructure. Profits grew from ₹67,000 to ₹544,700, with a CAGR of ~100%. ROI rose from 5.78% (2014) to 65.93% (2016), stabilizing at 45.39% (2017). Per-member profits for 16 members increased from ₹4,188 to ₹34,044 annually, boosting individual earnings from ₹2,000–3,000 to ₹6,000–7,000 monthly, surpassing Uttarakhand's per capita income (₹2,710). Land use expanded from 10 Nali (~0.2 ha) to 129 Nali (~2.58 ha), enabling diversification. Funding diversified from government agencies to include World Vision and SHG contributions.

Table 2: Profit Distribution by Activity (2014–2017)

Activity	2014 Profit (₹)	% Total	2015 Profit (₹)	% Total	2016 Profit (₹)	% Total	2017 Profit (₹)	% Total
Off-Season Vegetables	32,000	47.8	60,500	37.9	75,400	25.7	87,400	16.0
Poultry	30,000	44.8	60,000	37.6	80,000	27.3	90,000	16.5
Floriculture	5,000	7.5	10,000	6.3	10,000	3.4	10,000	1.8

Activity	2014 Profit (₹)	% Total	2015 Profit (₹)	% Total	2016 Profit (₹)	% Total	2017 Profit (₹)	% Total
Fisheries	-	-	29,000	18.2	45,000	15.3	75,000	13.8
Pulses Cultivation	-	-	-	-	53,000	18.1	139,500	25.6
Horticulture	-	-	-	-	30,000	10.2	32,000	5.9
Honey	-	-	-	-	-	-	10,800	2.0
NREGA Labor	-	-	-	-	-	-	100,000	18.4
Total	67,000	100	159,500	100	293,400	100	544,700	100

Activity Diversification:

The SHG expanded from three to eight activities by 2017, reducing reliance on vegetables and poultry (92.6% to 32.5% of profits). Pulses led in 2017 (₹139,500, 25.6%), followed by NREGA labor (₹100,000, 18.4%) and poultry (₹90,000, 16.5%). Fisheries grew to ₹75,000, while honey and horticulture contributed modestly. Average profit per activity rose from ₹22,333 to ₹68,088, reflecting efficiency.

Regional Context:

Pauri Garhwal's 7,215 SHGs with 45,831 members under the Lakhpati Didi Scheme (2022) indicate a robust SHG ecosystem. Gauri's diversified model outperforms single-activity SHGs (e.g., Pithoragarh's ₹11.7 lakh poultry revenue), offering a scalable framework. The initiative reduced migration, improved nutrition via organic produce, and supported education (e.g., Roshni Rawat's achievements). Organic farming and water conservation were adopted, though wild boar intrusions necessitated fencing. Post-COVID-19, incomes fell to ₹3,000–4,000 but remained above pre-SHG levels. Future plans include eco-tourism and beekeeping (24 kg honey sold).

Discussion

The Gauri SHG's OVOF initiative exemplifies women-led agricultural empowerment in hilly regions. Its economic success, with a 100% CAGR and 45.39% ROI by 2017, aligns with Bhardwaj and Gebrehiwot (2019) and Kumar et al. (2021), who reported 20–30% income increases through SHGs. Diversification, as advocated by Nayak et al. (2019), drove profitability, with pulses and NREGA labor reflecting market and policy alignment. Individual earnings of ₹6,000–7,000 surpassed regional benchmarks, supporting Ghosh et al. (2023) findings on SHGs' SDG contributions.

Social impacts, including reduced migration and educational advancements, echo Khan et al. (2020) and Rawat and Rawat (2024), though limited political empowerment (Maity 2024) suggests further leadership training needs. Environmental sustainability, through organic practices, aligns with Hossain et al. (2022), but challenges like wild boars and post-COVID setbacks highlight vulnerabilities noted by Ghosh et al. (2024). The initiative's resilience, maintaining incomes above pre-SHG levels, underscores the value of diversification, as per Brody et al. (2017).

The study addresses a research gap by analyzing an integrated farming model in Uttarakhand's hilly context, where few studies explore multi-activity SHGs' long-term resilience (Nayak et al. 2019).

Gauri's scalability depends on addressing market access and environmental risks, critical for hilly regions (Kumar et al. 2021).

Conclusion

The Gauri Self-Help Group's One Village One Farm (OVOF) initiative exemplifies the transformative potential of women-led integrated farming in the hill regions of Uttarakhand. By combining vegetable cultivation, poultry rearing, and collective decision-making, the initiative has significantly enhanced household incomes, food security, and women's agency. Beyond its economic impact, it has fostered community solidarity and revived traditional ecological knowledge, offering a scalable model for sustainable and inclusive rural development.

However, the initiative also faces emerging challenges, especially in the post-COVID-19 landscape. Fluctuating market access, limited institutional support, and increasing climate vulnerabilities threaten the sustainability of such grassroots efforts. Addressing these issues requires targeted and proactive policy interventions. For instance, land consolidation (Chakbandhi) should be implemented to facilitate efficient land use and crop planning in fragmented hill agriculture. Dedicated vegetable markets and region-specific minimum support prices are essential to ensure fair returns for hill produce. Moreover, expanding the coverage of crop insurance and microfinance tailored to SHGs can enhance resilience against environmental and financial shocks.

To strengthen long-term viability, the adoption of appropriate technologies such as trench farming systems, combined with capacity building in marketing, digital tools, and cooperative leadership, must be prioritized. These interventions can help replicate the Gauri SHG's success in similar geographies, reinforcing the case for investing in women-centric, climate-resilient agricultural models. Ultimately, this study adds to the broader discourse on sustainable rural development by showcasing how localized, community-driven innovations can bridge gender gaps and promote economic equity in hilly terrains.

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