



From dependence to self-reliance: Role of self-help groups in empowering rural women in eastern Uttar Pradesh

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Abstract

In rural India, Self-Help Groups (SHGs) have become a crucial grassroots tool for empowering women and reducing poverty. This study looks at how SHGs help rural women in Eastern Uttar Pradesh move from being economically dependent to being self-sufficient. In a few Eastern Uttar Pradesh districts, structured questionnaires and in-person interviews were used to gather primary data from rural women SHG members using a descriptive and analytical research approach. The study examines how SHG membership affects the economic, social, and decision-making aspects of women's empowerment. The results show that SHGs have greatly increased women's access to institutional credit, savings habits, and income levels, improving financial inclusion and economic security. Women's participation in SHGs has also boosted their social standing, leadership abilities, self-confidence, and involvement in household decision-making. Notwithstanding these favorable results, obstacles including restricted market access, insufficient skill development, and sociocultural limitations still have an impact on how long empowerment gains can last. The study highlights the necessity of increased institutional support and region-specific policy interventions to improve the efficacy of SHGs in Eastern Uttar Pradesh and finds that SHGs play a critical role in converting rural women into economically and socially empowered individuals.

Keywords: Self-help groups, women empowerment, rural development, poverty alleviation, eastern Uttar Pradesh

Introduction

In rural India, poverty and gender inequality remain major issues, especially in economically disadvantaged areas like Eastern Uttar Pradesh. Rural women continue to be disproportionately impacted by poverty despite several government attempts and development programs because they have less access to financial resources, career opportunities, education, and decision-making authority. Because empowered women contribute to home welfare and wider socioeconomic growth in addition to their own well-being, women's empowerment has become a key goal of development policy (Kabeer, 1999) [6].

Economic independence, social engagement, psychological self-assurance, and the capacity to exert agency in individual and group decision-making are all components of the multifaceted idea of women's empowerment. Conventional development strategies frequently viewed women as passive recipients rather than proactive change agents, leading to constrained and unsustainable results. The Self-Help Group (SHG) movement has become one of the most successful grassroots tactics for empowering rural women in India as a result of the rise in popularity of participatory and community-based development models (Agarwal, 2001) [1].

Self-Help Groups are voluntary organizations made up primarily of rural women from economically disadvantaged backgrounds who band together to engage in income-generating activities, obtain credit, and save on a regular basis. The SHG concept, which empowers women to transcend personal limitations via group solidarity, is founded on the ideas of mutual trust, communal responsibility, and self-management. In order to improve financial inclusion and lessen reliance on unofficial moneylenders, NABARD's SHG-Bank Linkage Programme

has been instrumental in integrating rural women into the formal financial system (Bansal, 2003^[2]; NABARD, 2022). Participation in SHGs appears to significantly improve women's economic position, including higher income, savings, and livelihood options, according to an expanding body of empirical research. Positive spillover benefits like better household nutrition, child education, and resistance to economic shocks are also highlighted in studies (Swain & Wallentin, 2009) [11]. SHGs have been shown to provide social and psychological empowerment in addition to economic advantages by boosting women's self-esteem, leadership abilities, and involvement in domestic and community decision-making (Cheston & Kuhn, 2002; Desai & Joshi, 2014) [3, 4].

SHGs have become a crucial institutional tool for fostering women's independence in Uttar Pradesh, a state characterized by patriarchal norms, poor female literacy, and few job possibilities. High rates of rural poverty, agrarian distress, and socioeconomic vulnerability are particularly prevalent in Eastern Uttar Pradesh. SHGs provide rural women with a venue for social recognition and collective voice in addition to economic operations. The degree to which SHGs have effectively helped women transition from reliance to independence, however, varies by region and is still poorly studied at the sub-regional level.

Despite SHGs' proven promise, a number of obstacles still restrict their efficacy, such as low literacy rates, insufficient skill development, poor market connections, and inconsistent institutional backing. Furthermore, local socio-cultural settings have a significant impact on empowering outcomes, making region-specific research necessary to reflect ground-level realities (Kabeer, 2005) [7]. In order to comprehend both their successes and shortcomings, a

thorough analysis of SHGs' role in empowering rural women in Eastern Uttar Pradesh is necessary.

In light of this, the current study aims to investigate how rural women in Eastern Uttar Pradesh have transitioned from economic dependency to self-reliance through their involvement in Self-Help Groups. The study intends to add to the body of knowledge and offer suggestions for improving SHG-based interventions for inclusive rural development by examining the economic, social, and decision-making aspects of empowerment.

Literature review

The development literature has extensively examined women's empowerment as a multifaceted process that includes resource access, the capacity to make wise life decisions, and the attainment of desired results. According to (Kabeer, 1999) [6] conceptualization of empowerment through three interconnected dimensions—resources, agency, and accomplishments—empowerment happens when women are given the opportunity to exercise choice in situations where they were previously denied it.

In order to increase women's negotiating power in homes and communities, (Agarwal, 2001) [1] highlighted the significance of group-based strategies and collective engagement. She contends that empowerment is intricately entwined with social interactions and institutional frameworks rather than being a purely individual phenomena. This viewpoint offers a solid theoretical basis for comprehending SHGs as venues for group empowerment as opposed to just financial organizations.

In the 1990s, NABARD's sponsorship of the SHG–Bank Linkage Programme gave the SHG movement in India a boost. According to Bansal (2003) [2], SHGs were created to encourage the poor to save money, make it easier for them to obtain institutional credit, and lessen their reliance on unscrupulous moneylenders. SHGs prioritize financial discipline, peer accountability, and self-management above traditional credit programs.

According to (NABARD, 2022), over 85% of SHG members are women, and the SHG–Bank Linkage Program has grown to be the largest microfinance effort globally. The paper highlights the contribution of Self-Help Groups (SHGs) to the advancement of women-led entrepreneurship, livelihood enhancement, and financial inclusion, particularly in India's rural and underdeveloped areas.

A substantial amount of empirical evidence indicates that women's economic empowerment is positively impacted by SHG membership. In their study of Indian Self-Help Groups, (Swain and Wallentin, 2009) [11] discovered that women members had better control over their finances, higher income levels, and better saving habits. The study also found that women's access to financing through SHGs strengthened their economic independence by allowing them to participate in income-generating activities.

According to (Cheston and Kuhn, 2002) [3], microfinance programs like Self-Help Groups (SHGs) support women's empowerment by boosting their financial stability and self-assurance, which in turn affects other aspects of empowerment. In a similar vein, (Desai and Joshi, 2014) [4] noted that SHGs' collective economic operations boosted women's financial standing and increased their ability to take part in community development projects. However, other academics warn that empowerment does not always follow from economic benefits. According to (Kabeer,

2005) [7], contextual elements like societal norms, household power dynamics, and educational attainment affect how microfinance affects empowerment.

SHGs are well known for their ability to provide social and psychological empowerment in addition to economic results. According to (Rao & Sanyal, 2010) [10], SHGs establish deliberative places where women may express their issues, hone their leadership abilities, and acquire a collective voice. Women's confidence and social recognition are increased when they participate in group meetings and decision-making procedures.

According to (Desai & Joshi, 2014) [4], women who participated in Self-Help Groups (SHGs) showed greater levels of involvement in household decisions pertaining to financial planning, health care, and children's education. Improvements in women's mobility and interactions with outside organizations like banks and local government entities were also mentioned in the study. These results provide credence to the claim that SHGs serve as social organizations that subvert conventional gender norms and enable women's social position to gradually change.

Numerous studies carried out in Uttar Pradesh emphasize the significance of Self-Help Groups (SHGs) in tackling rural poverty and women's empowerment; however, the majority of these studies concentrate on specific districts rather than the eastern area as a whole. According to a 2013 Planning Commission study, SHG-based interventions in Uttar Pradesh improved income stability and diversified rural households' sources of income. Studies conducted at the district level in Uttar Pradesh have revealed improvements in the self-employment prospects, loan availability, and saving practices of SHG members. However, these studies also noted issues that hindered the long-term sustainability of SHG outcomes, including low literacy rates, poor training, weak market connections, and little financial institution support (NABARD, 2022).

Eastern Uttar Pradesh offers a unique socioeconomic backdrop due to its greater rates of poverty, agricultural hardship, and deeply ingrained patriarchal customs. Even though there are many Self-Help Groups (SHGs) in this area thanks to government and non-government initiatives, there is still a dearth of systematic academic study that focuses on women's transition from dependency to self-reliance.

Research Gap

While there is a lot of study on SHGs and women's empowerment at the national and state levels, there aren't many region-specific studies that concentrate on Eastern Uttar Pradesh, according to the review of the literature. Furthermore, the social, psychological, and decision-making aspects of empowerment are often overlooked in favor of economic metrics. Additionally, little research has been done on how SHGs help rural women in socioeconomically disadvantaged areas make a comprehensive shift from reliance to independence.

Relevance of the Present Study

The current study aims to give a thorough examination of SHGs' involvement in empowering rural women in Eastern Uttar Pradesh in light of the aforementioned inadequacies. The study intends to add to the body of knowledge and provide policy-relevant insights for bolstering SHG-based interventions in rural India by utilizing a multifaceted framework of empowerment.

Research Methodology

1. Research Design

The current study looks at how Self-Help Groups (SHGs) empower rural women in Eastern Uttar Pradesh using a descriptive and analytical research design. While the analytical approach is used to evaluate the impact of SHG participation on different aspects of women's empowerment, such as economic, social, and decision-making aspects, the descriptive approach is used to comprehend the socioeconomic profile of SHG members and the operation of SHGs.

2. Area of the Study

The study is carried out in a few rural districts of Eastern Uttar Pradesh, an area with low female literacy, high rates of rural poverty, and few job possibilities. Due to its socioeconomic backwardness and the increasing number of Self-Help Groups (SHGs) under government and non-government programs, Eastern Uttar Pradesh was specifically chosen. These districts' chosen villages serve as the main analytical units.

3. Population and Sample

The study's target demographic consists of rural women who actively participate in self-help groups in the Eastern Uttar Pradesh districts that were chosen.

A multi-phase sampling method is used:

- Districts are chosen purposefully in the initial phase.
- Simple random sampling is used to choose communities in the second stage.
- Women SHG members are chosen at random from each hamlet during the last phase.

For results to be reliable and representative, a sample size of 120–200 respondents is thought to be sufficient.

4. Sources of Data

Both primary and secondary data sources served as the study's foundation.

Primary data was collected from SHG members by questionnaires and purpose of the questionnaire was to gather data on demographics, income levels, savings habits, credit availability, decision-making involvement, and perceived social status changes following SHG membership. Secondary data was collected from NABARD reports, Government of India publications, and the Indian Census, books, research journals, and earlier studies about women's empowerment and SHGs

5. Variables of the Study

The study focuses on the following key variables:

- **Independent Variable**
 - Participation in Self-Help Groups (duration of membership, frequency of meetings, access to credit, training received)
- **Dependent Variables (Women Empowerment Indicators)**
 - Economic empowerment (income, savings, employment)
 - Social empowerment (mobility, social participation)
 - Decision-making power (household and community decisions)

- Psychological empowerment (self-confidence, self-reliance)

6. Tools and Techniques of Data Collection

The main research tool is a structured questionnaire. Both closed-ended and Likert-scale items are included in the survey to gauge empowerment levels both before and after SHG involvement.

A pilot survey is used to pre-test the tool's validity, reliability, and clarity.

7. Methods of Data Analysis

Both descriptive and inferential statistical methods are used to analyze the gathered data, including:

- Analysis of percentages
- The standard deviation and mean
- Cross-tabulation and basic correlation analysis
- For precise result interpretation, statistical analysis is performed using Microsoft Excel.

8. Ethical Considerations

Throughout the investigation, ethical guidelines are closely adhered to. The goal of the study is explained to the respondents, and their involvement is completely optional. Respondent anonymity and confidentiality are preserved, and informed consent is acquired before any data is collected.

Limitations of the Study

The results are based on self-reported data, which may contain personal bias; the study is restricted to a few districts in Eastern Uttar Pradesh and may not be applicable to other areas. The sample size may be limited by time and resource limitations.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

The analysis is based on primary data gathered from 150 rural women who belong to Self-Help Groups (SHGs) in specific Eastern Uttar Pradesh districts. To evaluate the contribution of SHGs to the empowerment of rural women, the data were analyzed using percentage analysis, mean scores, and comparative interpretation.

Table 1: Socio-Economic Profile of Respondents

Particulars	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Age (Years)	Below 25	18	12.0
	25–35	52	34.7
	36–45	48	32.0
	Above 45	32	21.3
Education	Illiterate	36	24.0
	Primary	44	29.3
	Secondary	48	32.0
	Higher	22	14.7
Marital Status	Married	118	78.7
	Unmarried/Widowed	32	21.3
Occupation (Before SHG)	Housewife	60	40.0
	Agricultural labour	54	36.0
	Daily wage work	36	24.0

Interpretation

The majority of SHG members fall within the economically productive 25–45 age range, according to the table. The

majority of respondents have modest levels of education, suggesting that SHGs provide a welcoming environment for women with less formal schooling. The majority of women were either housewives or worked in low-paying informal jobs before joining SHGs, which demonstrated their vulnerability and economic reliance.

Table 2: Duration of SHG Membership

Duration	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Less than 1 year	20	13.3
1–3 years	46	30.7
3–5 years	54	36.0
More than 5 years	30	20.0
Total	150	100.0

Interpretation

The majority of respondents have been involved with SHGs for more than three years, according to the data. Longer participation increases exposure to training programs, financial discipline, and group activities, which raises the possibility of empowerment effects.

Table 3: Change in Monthly Income after Joining SHGs

Monthly Income Level	Before SHG (%)	After SHG (%)
Below ₹5,000	62.0	24.0
₹5,000–₹10,000	28.0	46.7
Above ₹10,000	10.0	29.3
Total	100.0	100.0

Interpretation

The data demonstrates a substantial change in income levels following SHG involvement. The percentage of women making less than ₹5,000 a month fell precipitously, while the percentage of women making more than ₹10,000 climbed significantly. This suggests that SHGs have been essential in raising women's earnings and encouraging financial independence.

Table 4: Savings Behaviour of Respondents

Savings Status	Frequency	Percentage (%)
No regular savings (Before SHG)	96	64.0
Regular savings through SHG	150	100.0

Interpretation

Most respondents had no regular savings prior to joining SHGs. All respondents indicated persistent saving practices after joining SHGs. This illustrates how SHG participation has improved rural women's financial security and discipline.

Table 5: Access to Credit Source

Source of Credit	Before SHG (%)	After SHG (%)
Moneylenders	58.7	12.0
Relatives/Friends	24.0	16.7
Banks/SHGs	17.3	71.3
Total	100.0	100.0

Interpretation

The table illustrates a significant change in loan availability. While access to institutional lending through SHGs and banks grew, reliance on moneylenders declined

dramatically. This change suggests less exploitation of rural women and financial inclusion.

Table 6: Participation in Household Decision-Making

Decision Area	Before SHG (%)	After SHG (%)
Financial decisions	22.7	68.0
Children's education	36.0	78.7
Health care	30.0	74.0
Social activities	18.0	62.0

Interpretation

The results show that after joining SHGs, women's involvement in household decision-making significantly increased. Women's voices within the family and community have been enhanced by the increased financial independence and self-assurance that SHGs have provided.

Table 7: Psychological and Social Empowerment Indicators

Indicator	Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree (%)
Increased self-confidence	82.0	12.0	6.0
Improved social status	76.7	16.0	7.3
Freedom of mobility	69.3	18.7	12.0
Leadership skills	64.0	22.0	14.0

Interpretation

The vast majority of responders reported gains in their leadership skills, social recognition, and self-confidence. These social and psychological shifts show that SHGs support both holistic personal development and economic empowerment.

The statistical analysis makes it abundantly evident that Self-Help Groups have been instrumental in helping rural women in Eastern Uttar Pradesh move from economic dependency to independence. Increases in income, savings, loan availability, decision-making power, and psychological confidence all demonstrate that SHGs are useful instruments for women's empowerment and rural development.

Conclusion

The current study looked at how Self-Help Groups (SHGs) in Eastern Uttar Pradesh empower rural women and help them move from reliance to independence. The study's conclusions unequivocally show that SHGs have become a successful grassroots organization for combating rural poverty and advancing the socioeconomic empowerment of women in the area.

According to the report, rural women's economic standing has greatly improved as a result of their involvement in SHGs. Among SHG members, there was a discernible rise in income levels, consistent saving practices, and institutional credit availability. Improved financial inclusion and economic security are reflected in the transition from reliance on unofficial moneylenders to formal banks and SHG-based financing. Women were able to significantly contribute to household income by engaging in income-generating activities, which decreased their reliance on male family members.

The study shows significant advancements in women's social and psychological empowerment in addition to economic achievements. Participation in SHGs improved rural women's mobility, social recognition, leadership abilities, and self-confidence. Women's increasing agency within their families and communities is demonstrated by their increased participation in family decision-making about social issues, health care, education, and finances.

These results show that SHGs serve as platforms for group education, social engagement, and individual growth in addition to acting as financial mediators.

The study does acknowledge, however, that the degree of empowerment attained through SHGs differs from person to person and is impacted by variables like length of membership, educational attainment, exposure to training, and sociocultural setting. In some parts of Eastern Uttar Pradesh, obstacles like restricted market access, insufficient skill development, and enduring patriarchal traditions continue to hamper SHGs' ability to reach their full potential.

To sum up, Self-Help Groups have been essential in helping rural women become active economic and social agents rather than passive dependents. The impact of SHGs can be further increased by bolstering institutional support, increasing skill-based training, and strengthening market connections. In order to guarantee that SHGs remain a potent tool for women's empowerment and inclusive rural development in Eastern Uttar Pradesh, the study emphasizes the necessity of region-specific policies and ongoing interventions.

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