

Role of Self-Help Groups in Women's Empowerment and Sustainable Management of Minor Forest Produce in Rural Chhattisgarh

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ABSTRACT

Minor Forest Produce (MFP) is an important source of income for tribal communities living in forests, and self-help groups (SHGs) are involved in procuring and aggregating MFPs. The sustainable management of natural resources relies heavily on women's contributions.

This study aims to focus mainly on the role of SHGs in enhancing the empowerment of women and on assessing the impact of the same on MFP management practices that are concerned with adopting the sustainability approach. To assess how SHG empowered women at the grassroots levels of rural Chhattisgarh, a multidimensional index of empowerment was adopted. 200 women were selected through the stratified sampling method for in-depth surveys and interviews. Data was analyzed using descriptive statistics and regression analysis. The result showed that after joining SHG women are becoming more confident, assertive decision-makers, and better natural resource managers. Self-help groups have the potential to improve environmental and economic results in their communities by focusing on the empowerment of women. This study revealed that empowering women through the formation of SHGs is crucial in determining the sustainable management of minor forest products in rural Chhattisgarh. Therefore, there is a continual requirement for assistance and capacity building of self-help groups for them to continue playing an important role in activities that empower women while also supporting sustainable methods in operating microfinance programs (MFP).

INTRODUCTION

In developing sustainable practices, particularly in the administration of natural resources, the advancement of women is crucial (Rahman, 2017). For example, in rural regions such as Chhattisgarh, where Minor Forest Produce (MFP) forms an important part of the livelihoods of tribal communities, women's involvement in these resources can make all the difference in the effectiveness of sustainability practices (APMAS., 2017). Formation of Self-Help Groups (SHGs) over the years, becoming an important vehicle for women's empowerment, in enabling them to take an active role in MFP management and contribute towards adopting sustainable resource practices (Dewangan, 2017). This examines how the empowerment of women through SHGs influences the promotion of sustainable practices in MFP management in rural Chhattisgarh (Wahul, 2017).

1.1. Self-Help Groups' Contribution to Women's Empowerment

Self-help groups (SHGs) function as an enabling tool to boost women's empowerment, more so in rural and underserved areas (PATEL, 2022). The SHGs offer women a collaborative space for co-learning as well as the joint decision-making process regarding the handling of MFP (Dhanasree, 2014). Resource and skill attainment and eventual confidence in managing forest resources responsibly and in a sustainable manner follow as women join the SHGs (Dutta, 2018). SHGs transform women into confident decision-makers and resource managers as elements both of personal empowerment and of sustainability in the broader community (Thangamanil, 2013).

1.2. Sustainable Practices in Minor Forest Produce

Management

MFP is an important source of the rural economy particularly for tribal communities that derive their livelihoods from forest resources (Kaur, 2017). However, traditional approaches towards harvesting and consumption of MFP often translate into unsustainable behaviors, thereby depleting natural resources (Nandini, 2017). This research explores how women's empowerment through SHGs leads to more sustainable practices in collecting, processing, and marketing MFP. With the empowerment of women, SHGs enable better management of resources towards MFPs, thus ensuring that these practices remain both economically and environmentally sustainable (Sinha, 2021). Given the potential for significant social and environmental impact, a detailed analysis of the interplay between women's empowerment and sustainable Minor Forest Produce management in rural Chhattisgarh is imperative.

1.3. Research objectives

The following is a summary of the study's primary goals:

- To assess the impact of SHGs on women's empowerment in rural Chhattisgarh.
- To evaluate the role of women's empowerment in sustainable management of Minor Forest Produce.
- The socio-economic benefits that can be identified with the involvement of women in MFP management.

1.4. Research Hypothesis

H1: The role of Self-Help Groups (SHGs) is significant towards empowering women in rural Chhattisgarh.

H2: The adoption of sustainable methods in the management of minor forest produce (MFP) is positively correlated with

women's empowerment.

H3: Women's participation in Minor Forest Produce management significantly contributes to improvements in their socio-economic status.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Shylendra (2018) analyzed the evolving federated structures of self-help groups in India, that emerged as a natural extension of the SHG movement. The SHG federations aimed at sustainability of the SHGs as well as socio-economic empowerment of their members. However, on the basis of the findings, the process of forming SHG federations was found to be inconsistent all over the country and there were quite a lot of problems in the design and role of the federations. Federations, conceptualized as bottom-up, democratic, and economically sound extensions of primary cooperatives, were theorized to provide benefits through vertical integration by meeting shared needs and values of members (Shylendra, 2018). The study critically examined these challenges and proposed ways to strengthen SHG federations, emphasizing their potential for sustainable development if structured effectively.

Xess and Tiwari (2023) discussed how tribal women play critically important roles in NWFP collection, utilization, and management. However, these roles were unacknowledged and underappreciated. NWFP collection, such as bamboo, tendu leaves, cocoons, and mahua, was deemed to be primarily the work of women, which frequently surpassed that of their male counterparts in their compatibility with these tasks. The study emphasized improved involvement of women in sustainable management of NWFP through better support systems, training, and documentation of indigenous knowledge (Xess, 2023). The story depicted how the empowerment of women in this domain could mean well-being in livelihoods, healthcare, food security, and socio-economic conditions that strengthen the sustainability of NWFP practices.

Nandi and Garg (2017) looked into the severe impacts of forest clearance and land grabbing on the indigenous populations in Chhattisgarh. Almost half of the state is covered with forests, which are highly important components of the local indigenous people's livelihoods and identity. Teak plantation expansions have continued to replace natural forests, further amplifying the ecological and socio-economic issues. The paper highlighted the efforts of AAS, an indigenous women's organization toward the restoration of land and forest rights. Through various strategies, women confronted the state in a bid to obtain some measure of justice in terms of natural resource management (Nandi, 2017). The research stressed the use of grassroots organizations in environmental justice and the protection of indigenous rights.

Tripathy (2017) examined the socio-economic issues related to women in India, especially in tribal regions, in which the women are still unempowered and dependent on men owing to poor skill development and limited economic opportunities. The researchers discussed microfinance to be one of the tools for carrying out social and economic empowerment among the women through the SHGs. Increasing production activities, such as small businesses and microenterprises, allowed women to engage in productive occupations, increase household incomes, and enhance their overall well-being. Studies conducted in tribal-dominated villages of KBK districts of Odisha have indicated the microfinance potential in eradicating poverty and empowering rural poor through livelihood empowerment (Tripathy, 2017). This study further elicits some transforming effects of microfinance on the socio-economic independence of tribal women.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The present study makes use of a systematic and robust research methodology with an aim to unravel the impact of women's empowerment on promoting sustainable practices in managing Minor Forest Produce (MFP) in rural Chhattisgarh. This methodology thus combines both descriptive and analytical approaches directed at achieving the research goals through the combined use of quantitative and qualitative methods. A detailed description of the methodology appears immediately below:

3.1. Research Design

The design of this study would be descriptive and analytical. It is because it deals with the role of SHGs in empowering women, its effect on sustainable management of the forest, and their economic and social benefits for women participation. Descriptive methods are used to gain an overview of the SHG operations and demographic details and their analytical techniques to find out the correlations between empowerment and sustainability. The researchers used quantitative surveys to analyze in statistical terms and qualitative in-depth interviews.

3.2. Study Area

The research is carried out in the rural landscape of Chhattisgarh, focusing on villages that are actively involved in MFP collection and management through SHGs. It was selected since it is endowed with rich forest resources and a well-established SHG framework, making this context suitable for the study of the interplay between empowerment and practices that are sustainable.

3.3. Sampling Method

The study adopts stratified sampling to ensure broad representation of women involved in MFP activities in SHGs. Stratification includes age, education, duration of membership in SHGs, and socio-economic background factors. A sample size of 200 participants was selected based on statistical validity that will ensure in-depth data collection.

3.4. Data Collection Methods

For the comprehensive analysis, the paper will use both primary and secondary data.

- **Primary Data:** Through structured surveys, primary data is drawn based on the questionnaire that measured empowerment across economic, social, and political dimensions, sustainable MFP practices, and socio-economic benefits among 200 participants. Then through in-depth interviews of selected participants, further insight is gathered on their experiences and challenges in turn expanding the quantitative findings.
- **Secondary Data:** Analyzes the background and supports primary data by reviewing reports, government publications, and NGO documents regarding SHGs, MFP Management, and Women Empowerment.

3.5. Data Analysis

For this study, the data collected was analyzed using quantitative tools to meet the research objectives adequately. The following tests and analyses were used:

- The use of Descriptive Statistics summarized the demographic and socio-economic features of the participants, offering insight into the background and socio-economic conditions of the women under study.
- Paired Sample t-test was conducted to determine whether SHGs could make a sizeable difference in women's empowerment in rural Chhattisgarh. In particular, the paired t-test compared the pre- and post-intervention scores on empowerment among women.
- The relationship between women's empowerment and the adoption of sustainable MFP practices was investigated using regression analysis.
- To determine how women's involvement in MFP management affects their socioeconomic standing, multiple regression analysis is utilized.

3.6. Tools and Software

The structured Likert scale questionnaire is used for data collection, either online by Google Forms or on paper. Descriptive statistics, regression, and correlation analysis are among the statistical analyses that are carried out using SPSS software, which is the statistical package for social sciences.

4. DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

The data produced by women's involvement in SHGs involved in the management of Minor Forest Produce (MFP) is thoroughly examined in this section. The analysis will be conducted to test the research hypotheses and interpret the findings, focusing on women's empowerment, adoption of sustainable practices, and their socio-economic benefits.

4.1. Demographic Analysis

Demographic analysis of the SHG women participants in MFP management reveals key characteristics of the sample population. In terms of age, 35% of them belong to the group of 26-35 years of age, 30% to the 36-45 years group, 20% to

the 18-25 years age group, and 15% to the above 45 years age group. Education-wise, 35% of the participants have completed primary education, while 30% have completed secondary education. A very small proportion of the sample has no formal education (25%) or higher education (10%).

Table 1: Demographic Data Analysis of SHG Women Participants in MFP Management

Demographic Characteristic	Category	Number of Participants	Percentage (%)
Age Group	18-25 years	40	20%
	26-35 years	70	35%
	36-45 years	60	30%
	Above 45 years	30	15%
Education Level	No formal education	50	25%
	Primary education	70	35%
	Secondary education	60	30%
	Higher education	20	10%
Duration of SHG Membership	Less than 1 year	20	10%
	1-3 years	80	40%
	4-6 years	60	30%
	More than 6 years	40	20%
Socio-Economic Background	Low income	100	50%
	Middle income	80	40%
	High income	20	10%

Considering the duration of membership of the SHG, 40% of the participants have been members for 1-3 years, and 30% have been members for 4-6 years. A large section (50%) of the participants

belongs to the low-income category, with 40% belonging to middle-income and 10% to high-income families.

4.2. Descriptive Statistics

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics Summary

Variable	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Age of Participants (Years)	200	36.5	9.12	18	60
Education Level (Years)	200	6.4	3.5	0	12
Duration of SHG Membership (Years)	200	3.8	2.1	1	10
Financial Independence (Scale 1-5)	200	4.2	0.9	2	5
Decision-Making Ability (Scale 1-5)	200	4.0	0.8	1	5
Community Involvement (Scale 1-5)	200	3.8	0.7	1	5
Sustainable Practices Adoption (Scale 1-5)	200	4.3	1.1	1	5
Improvement in Socio-economic Status (Scale 1-5)	200	4.0	0.9	1	5

The characteristics of participants can be derived from the descriptive statistics. On average, participants are 36.5 years old, with a standard deviation of 9.12; hence, the age range is quite diversified and spreads from 18 to 60 years. The years of education attended by participants average 6.4, with a standard deviation of 3.5, whereas the duration of SHG membership is an average of 3.8 years with a standard deviation of 2.1. Participants reported a high level of financial independence (mean of 4.2 on a 1-5 scale),

decision-making ability (mean of 4.0), and community involvement (mean of 3.8). The adoption of sustainable practices is also notable, with an average score of 4.3, suggesting that women in this group are actively engaged in sustainable MFP management. The mean improvement in socio-economic status is 4.0 and moderately high; hence the women show positive socio-economic change with their involvement in SHG and MFP activities.

4.3. Hypothesis Testing

4.3.1. The Involvement of Self-Help Groups (SHGs) in Increasing the Empowerment of Women

H0₁: The role of Self-Help Groups (SHGs) is not significant towards empowering women in rural Chhattisgarh.

H1₁: The role of Self-Help Groups (SHGs) is significant towards empowering women in rural Chhattisgarh.

In order to determine whether or whether the mean difference in women's empowerment scores, as measured before and after entering Self-Help Groups (SHGs), is statistically significant, a paired sample t-test has been employed to answer the H0₁ and H1₁.

Two variables have been created that represent women's empowerment scores as follows:

- Pre-Empowerment Score: Women's empowerment score before joining SHGs.
- Post-Empowerment Score: Women's empowerment score after joining SHGs.

Descriptive statistics for pre- and post-empowerment scores are provided in Table 3. The Pre-Empowerment Score has a mean of 2.8 (SD = 1.1), whereas the Post-Empowerment Score has a higher mean of 4.2 (SD = 0.9), based on 200 participants. There is a significant increase in empowerment levels after joining SHGs.

Table 3: Paired Sample Statistics

Variable	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pre-Empowerment Score	2.8	200	1.1	0.078
Post-Empowerment Score	4.2	200	0.9	0.063

Table 4 reveals a significant mean difference of -1.4 between the pre and post-empowerment scores with a t-value at -16.28 where $p < 0.001$. Since the p-value is below 0.05, the null hypothesis that stated the role of SHG is not significant towards empowering

Table 4: Paired Sample t-test

Paired Differences	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Pre-Empowerment - Post-Empowerment	-1.4	1.2	0.086	-16.28	199	0.000

4.3.2. Empowerment of Women and Sustainable Practices in MFP Management

H0₂: The adoption of sustainable methods in the management of minor forest produce (MFP) has no discernible connection to women's empowerment.

H1₂: The adoption of sustainable methods in the management of minor forest produce (MFP) is positively correlated with women's

women is rejected.

Therefore the alternative hypothesis that stated women's empowerment is significantly increased with membership in the SHG is accepted.

empowerment.

The association between the adoption of sustainable practices in MFP management as the dependent variable and women's empowerment as the independent variable was examined using regression analysis.

Table 5: Model Summary

Model	R	R ²	Adjusted R ²	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	0.75	0.56	0.55	0.32

a. Predictors: (Constant), Women's Empowerment

There is a strong positive correlation ($R = 0.75$) between the adoption of sustainable MFP practices and the level of women's empowerment. With an R^2 value of 0.56, women's empowerment accounts for 56% of the variation in sustainable MFP practices. The

standard error of estimate is 0.32, which indicates little departure from the regression line, and the adjusted R^2 is at 0.55, which indicates a strong fit for the model.

Table 6: ANOVA

Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	36.58	1	36.58	98.72	0.000
Residual	28.85	198	0.15		
Total	65.43	199			

a. Dependent Variable: Adoption of Sustainable MFP Practices

b. Predictors: (Constant), Women's Empowerment

The statistical significance of the model is very high ($F = 98.72$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that women's empowerment explains a significant portion of the variation in sustainable MFP adoption. Women's empowerment significantly predicts sustainable MFP practices; coefficient $B = 0.450$ indicates that for every unit rise

in the empowering variable, sustainable practices will increase by 0.45 units. The highly favorably significant beta value is 0.75. The relevance is further supported by the t-value of 9.930 and the p-value of 0.000.

Table 7: Coefficients

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients	Std. Error	Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	0.083	0.019		4.305	0.000
Women's Empowerment	0.450	0.045	0.75	9.930	0.000

a. Dependent Variable: Adoption of Sustainable MFP Practices
The null hypothesis asserts that there is no meaningful connection between sustainable MFP practices and women's empowerment is rejected and the alternative hypothesis, is accepted that states women's empowerment with significant improvement actually enhances the adoption of sustainable practices in MFP management. These findings underscore the critical role that women's empowerment plays in fostering sustainability within the MFP management practices, emphasizing its positive impact on promoting sustainable development.

4.3.3. Effects of Participation of Women in MFP Management on Socio-economic Status

H0₃: Women's participation in Minor Forest Produce (MFP) management does not have a significant effect on the advancement of their socio-economic status.

H1₃: Women's participation in Minor Forest Produce (MFP) management has a significant effect on advancing their socio-economic status.

The association between women's involvement in MFP management, the independent variable, and socioeconomic level, the dependent variable, was investigated using a multiple regression analysis. This test determines whether women's involvement in MFP management is a significant predictor of improved socioeconomic position.

Table 8: Model Summary

Model	R	R ²	Adjusted R ²	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	0.85	0.72	0.71	0.25

- a. Predictors: (Constant), Women's Participation in MFP Management

Table 8 shows an R-value of 0.85 and an R² value of 0.72, which explains 72% of the variation in socio-economic status by the participation of women in MFP management. The model is a good fit with a standard error of 0.25.

The model is statistically significant, as shown in Table 9, with a p-value of 0.000 and an F-value of 180.58. This shows that

women's involvement in MFP management has a great impact on socio-economic status.

Thus, as shown in Table 10, for every unit of women's participation, the socio-economic condition of the women improves by 0.65 units. The strong positive coefficient (Beta = 0.85) and a t-value of 13.56 also strengthen the notion that women's participation has a significant impact upon socio-economic improvements.

Table 9: ANOVA

Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	95.25	1	95.25	180.58	0.000
Residual	36.75	198	0.19		
Total	132.00	199			

- a. Dependent Variable: Socio-Economic Status
b. Predictors: (Constant), Women's Participation in MFP Management

Since there is no discernible correlation between women's

participation and socioeconomic status, the results are suitable to reject the null hypothesis H03; however, H13 is accepted since women's socioeconomic status is significantly raised by their involvement in MFP management.

Table 10: Coefficients

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	1.320	0.120		11.00	0.000
Women's Participation in MFP	0.650	0.048	0.85	13.56	0.000

- a. Dependent Variable: Socio-Economic Status

5. MAIN FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The studies establish some very meaningful understanding into the significance of SHGs in improving women's empowerment, the effects of empowerment on sustainable MFP management practices, and also the overall socio-economic benefits pertaining to the participation of women in MFP management. In that vein, these results are contextualized within the specific setting of rural Chhattisgarh, where the SHGs are the central concern in the betterment of the socio-economic condition of women, especially in the management of MFP resources.

5.1. Empowerment through SHGs

The findings of the research reveal that SHGs have greatly improved women's empowerment, which holds a vital place to improve their social and economic functions in villages. Women from rural Chhattisgarh witnessed relatively weak decision-making capacity and financial dependence before joining SHGs, which further hindered the growth of both personal and professional lives. However, paired sample t-test results regarding women's empowerment after joining SHGs imply a massive improvement. All these respondents were empowered prior to joining the SHGs. With an average empowerment score of 2.8, their empowerment went up to 4.2 after participation with a difference of -1.4. The increase in empowerment scores indicates that SHGs provide women with the enabling tools and opportunities for them to enhance agency within their houses and communities. Empowerment is observed on different dimensions such as financial independence, access to resources, and enhanced community decision-making role. In the rural context of Chhattisgarh state, where traditional gender roles restrict and narrow down the scope of their functions and roles for women, SHGs represent a transformative platform for women in knowledge building, financial management, and collective action. This empowerment is important in a context where a woman's role was traditionally household and SHGs give them social and economic capital to advance their position in the community.

5.2. Empowerment and Sustainable MFP Practices

Another important result from the study is that of women's empowerment and subsequent adoption of sustainable MFP management practices. According to a regression study, women's empowerment and their participation in sustainable MFP management practices are strongly and statistically significantly correlated. In the regression analysis, it shows that there is an R-value of 0.75, with the result indicating a high positive correlation. This means that 56% of the variation of sustainable MFP adoption can be explained by the level of women's empowerment. This would imply that as women become more empowered to control their lives and resources, they would be likely to initiate and become an advocate for sustainable management of MFP resources, among other things, including better harvesting techniques, the resource conserving approaches, and environmental stewardship. The ANOVA results, which show a statistically significant association between sustainability and empowerment with a p-value of 0.000, further confirm this. Empowered women are likely to have the information, as well as leadership skills for sustainability advocacy and practice in conserving forest resources and ensuring long-term health. In rural communities where natural resources such as MFP provide critical inputs for livelihood, this shift towards sustainability promotes environmental benefits while promoting economic sustainability for generations to come.

5.3. Socio-Economic Benefits of SHG Participation in MFP Management

The third of the major findings is the socio-economic benefits that women reap through involvement in MFP management. Such benefits are closely related to the empowerment of women, as rising empowerment through involvement in SHGs influences some of the prime socio-economic indicators of women's lives. There was an incorporation of study descriptive statistics, which indicates that women in SHG report enhanced financial independence, increased decision-making authority within their households, and greater involvement in community affairs. The result of these changes is

higher household incomes and better opportunities for children's education along with a greater recognition within the communities. It not only improves the economic well-being of women but also the general economic conditions of their families by allowing them to take decisions on the expenditure, saving, and investments in the family. Results from the paired t-tests further support these findings since the improvements in women's socio-economic status are significantly high when they join SHGs. This enables women to empower themselves and contribute more in the income generation cycle by engaging directly in MFP management activities such as harvesting and processing, marketing of forest products. With this, they benefit not just economically but also uplift their families and communities at large. Moreover, as the economic status of women improves, they are in an even better position to obtain quality educational opportunities for the children and contribute to the long-term development of their families and communities.

CONCLUSION

This research points out the critical role played by women's empowerment in the promotion of sustainable practices management in Minor Forest Produce in rural Chhattisgarh. By contributing to the development of Self-Help Groups (SHGs), women gained increased participation in decision-making procedures and resource management, which has resulted in confidence in handling Minor Forest Produce activities. This study gives an evident outcome regarding the positive correlation between empowering women and adopting sustainable MFP practices; with higher empowering levels yield more efficient and responsible handling of resources. However, the results demonstrate that women's involvement in MFP administration has a favorable impact on their socioeconomic position by providing them with more access to resources for improved social standing and better chances for economic activity. The statistical analyses also include regression models and paired t-tests concerning the research and confirmed in terms of how women's participation in SHGs increases both individual empowerment and significantly contributes to the sustainable management of forest resources. This underscores the importance of continued support and capacity building for SHGs as a means of fostering gender equality and environmental sustainability. The research implies that empowerment of women through SHGs in rural localities can significantly enhance the management of MFP, therefore leading to both socio-economic development and sustainability.

SUMMARY AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

This research strongly suggests that SHGs are crucial tools through which the empowerment of women is to be enhanced and sustainable MFP management practices that catalyze rural-area socio-economic development are to be approached. The evidence, therefore, supports the hypothesis that SHGs contribute to both gender equity and environmental sustainability. Evidence shows that empowering women has significant consequences for how they manage natural resources, exhibit collective action, and mobilize to protect environmental sustainability. Further, the socio-economic improvements reportedly stated by women in this study indicate that SHGs not only improve women's social and political empowerment but also bring realistic benefits of financial stability, better living conditions, and increased community engagement. These results emphasize the importance of strengthening and expanding the role of SHGs, especially in rural regions like Chhattisgarh, where women have been notoriously excluded from all resource-related decisions and opportunities. Policymakers can capitalize on the SHG system to create positive feedback where more empowered women lead to greater improvement in environmental practices and socio-economic development. Continuing the support to SHGs and involving women in their active role in the management of MFP, gender equity and environmental sustainability can be promoted for healthier and better rural living.

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