RURAL SOCIOLOGY AND ECONOMICS

Effectiveness of Self-Help Groups in Improving the Socio-Economic Empowerment of Rural Women

Iqbal Singh

Department of Social Work, Indira Gandhi National Open University, India

Published November 2026

Abstract

Women constitute an essential part of rural society and play a significant role in household management, agriculture, livestock care, child-rearing, food security and community development. Despite their substantial contribution to rural development, many rural women continue to experience economic dependency, limited access to productive resources, inadequate educational opportunities, restricted mobility and limited participation in household and community-level decision-making. In this context, Self-Help Groups (SHGs) have emerged as an important community-based mechanism for promoting women's socio-economic empowerment. SHGs encourage women to organize collectively, save regularly, access credit, develop livelihood opportunities, enhance knowledge and strengthen their participation in social and economic decision-making.

The present article examines the effectiveness of Self-Help Groups in improving the socio-economic empowerment of rural women. It discusses the concept and characteristics of SHGs, their role in promoting savings and financial inclusion, access to credit, income generation, entrepreneurship, social awareness, leadership, decision-making and community participation. The article also explores the contribution of SHGs to reducing women's economic dependency and strengthening their confidence and collective identity.

The analysis suggests that the effectiveness of SHGs should not be assessed merely in terms of the amount of savings accumulated or loans distributed. Their real contribution lies in their capacity to bring changes in women's economic position, social status, self-confidence, mobility, awareness and participation in decision-making processes. SHGs provide rural women with a collective platform through which they can identify their common problems and develop collective solutions.

However, the empowerment potential of SHGs is influenced by several factors, including the quality of leadership, regularity of meetings, training opportunities, access to markets, institutional support and the sustainability of livelihood activities. The article argues that SHGs can become powerful instruments of rural women's empowerment when financial inclusion is combined with capacity building, skill development, social awareness and long-term institutional support.

Keywords: self-help groups; rural women; socio-economic empowerment; financial inclusion; women empowerment; livelihood; microfinance; social work

1 Introduction

Women play a central role in the social and economic life of rural communities. In rural India, women contribute extensively to agricultural activities, livestock management, household production, child care and the maintenance of family welfare. Their contribution to rural development is therefore significant. However, women's contribution has historically not always received adequate recognition. A large number of rural women continue to experience economic dependency, limited ownership of productive resources and restricted access to financial institutions.

The socio-economic position of women is closely associated with their access to resources, education, employment opportunities and participation in decision-making. When women do not have independent income or control over financial resources, they often become dependent on male members of the family. Such dependency may restrict their ability to make decisions regarding their own lives, children's education, health care and household expenditure.

Rural women frequently face multiple forms of disadvantage. These may include poverty, illiteracy, unemployment, gender discrimination, lack of mobility and limited access to institutional credit. Traditional social structures may also restrict women's participation in public activities. Consequently, rural development cannot be considered complete without the active participation and empowerment of women.

Women's empowerment is not limited to providing financial assistance. It is a broader process through which women develop the ability to make informed choices and exercise greater control over their lives. Empowerment includes economic independence, self-confidence, access to information, participation in decision-making and the ability to challenge discrimination.

One of the important approaches developed to address the economic and social marginalization of women is the formation of Self-Help Groups. SHGs are small voluntary groups, generally consisting of individuals from similar socio-economic backgrounds, who come together to save money, access credit and address common problems. In the context of rural women, SHGs have become an important mechanism for collective action and community development.

The concept of SHGs is based on the belief that poor individuals possess the capacity to improve their own conditions when they are organized collectively and provided appropriate opportunities. Rather than treating poor women only as beneficiaries of welfare programmes, the SHG approach recognizes them as active participants in the development process.

Through regular meetings, savings and collective discussions, women develop a sense of solidarity. SHGs provide opportunities for women to discuss economic difficulties, family problems, health issues and community concerns. In many cases, the group becomes a platform through which women gain information and confidence.

The economic activities of SHGs generally begin with regular savings. Even small contributions made regularly can create a common group fund. Members may borrow money from this fund according to group rules. This process can reduce dependence on informal moneylenders and encourage financial discipline.

Over time, SHGs may establish connections with banks and other financial institutions. This enables members to access formal credit for productive activities. Women may use loans for agriculture, livestock rearing, small enterprises, tailoring, food processing, handicrafts and other income-generating activities.

The importance of SHGs extends beyond economic benefits. Participation in group activities can contribute to changes in women's social position. Women who previously had limited interaction outside their families may begin participating in regular meetings and community activities. They may gain confidence in expressing their opinions and interacting with institutions.

The present article therefore examines the effectiveness of Self-Help Groups in improving the socio-economic empowerment of rural women. The discussion focuses on both economic and social dimen-

sions of empowerment. It also examines the challenges faced by SHGs and suggests measures for strengthening their role in rural development.

2 Concept of self-help groups

A Self-Help Group can be understood as a small voluntary association of individuals who come together to achieve common social and economic objectives. In India, SHGs commonly consist of women belonging to similar economic and social backgrounds. The members meet regularly, save small amounts of money and create a common fund.

The fundamental principle of an SHG is collective self-help. Members attempt to solve their problems through cooperation rather than depending entirely on external assistance. The group encourages participation, responsibility and mutual support.

SHGs generally operate on certain basic principles. These include regular meetings, regular savings, collective decision-making, internal lending and maintenance of financial records. These principles contribute to transparency and accountability.

The group provides an opportunity for women to develop financial discipline. Regular savings, even when small, create a habit of managing money. Women who previously had limited experience of financial activities may gradually become familiar with savings, loans and repayment.

The collective nature of SHGs is particularly important. An individual woman may experience difficulty in approaching a financial institution or government agency. However, when women act collectively, their confidence and bargaining capacity may increase.

SHGs also promote mutual trust among members. Members often belong to the same village or nearby communities and therefore understand each other's social and economic conditions. This local relationship can strengthen cooperation.

The group process creates a sense of responsibility. Members are expected to attend meetings, contribute savings and participate in discussions. This regular participation can encourage women to become more active in collective activities.

Another important feature of SHGs is democratic functioning. Ideally, decisions are taken collectively. Members discuss loans, savings, group activities and other matters. This process provides women with practical experience of participation and decision-making.

Thus, SHGs are not simply financial groups. They can function as social institutions that encourage women to organize, communicate and act collectively.

3 Rural women and socio-economic disadvantage

The need for women's empowerment becomes particularly important in rural areas because many women experience multiple forms of disadvantage. Poverty and gender inequality often interact with each other and create barriers to women's development.

Many rural women contribute significantly to agriculture and household production.

They may participate in sowing, harvesting, livestock care and food processing. However, their contribution is frequently treated as unpaid family labour.

Economic dependency can reduce women's bargaining power within the household. A woman without an independent source of income may have limited influence over financial decisions. She may depend on other family members for personal expenses and basic needs.

Limited access to formal credit is another major challenge. Poor women may not possess property or other forms of collateral required by financial institutions. Consequently, they may depend on informal sources of borrowing.

Informal credit may involve high interest rates and exploitative conditions. Financial emergencies can therefore increase the vulnerability of poor households.

Education is another important factor affecting women's empowerment. Limited educational opportunities can reduce access to employment, information and public services. Women with limited literacy may experience difficulties in understanding financial procedures and government programmes.

Social restrictions may also limit women's mobility. In some communities, women may have limited opportunities to travel independently or participate in public activities. This can reduce their exposure to new information and opportunities.

Gender discrimination may influence access to health care, nutrition and education. Women and girls may receive fewer opportunities in comparison to male family members.

These challenges demonstrate that women's empowerment requires a comprehensive approach. Economic assistance alone may not be sufficient. Women also require education, skills, awareness and opportunities for participation.

SHGs can address some of these challenges by creating a local platform for women. Regular meetings provide opportunities for women to interact with one another and share experiences. This collective interaction can reduce social isolation.

4 Self-help groups as an instrument of women's empowerment

The empowerment potential of SHGs lies in their ability to combine economic activities with collective participation. Women become members of a group and gradually develop relationships of trust and cooperation.

The group process encourages women to participate actively. Members are not expected to remain passive recipients of assistance. They contribute savings, attend meetings and participate in decision-making.

This participation can create a sense of ownership. Women may begin to view the group as their own institution rather than as an externally imposed programme.

Collective activities can also increase confidence. Women who initially hesitate to speak may gradually become comfortable expressing their opinions during meetings.

SHGs provide opportunities for leadership development. Members may take responsibility for maintaining records, organizing meetings and communicating with institutions. Such responsibilities can strengthen organizational skills.

The process of empowerment can therefore be gradual. A woman may initially join an SHG primarily to save money. Over time, she may gain financial knowledge, confidence and leadership experience.

The collective platform can also strengthen women's social identity. Women may begin to recognize that many of their problems are shared by other women. This realization can transform individual concerns into collective concerns.

For example, issues related to domestic violence, children's education, sanitation or access to government services may be discussed collectively. Women may then explore possible solutions.

Therefore, SHGs can contribute to empowerment at different levels: individual, household and community.

5 Economic empowerment through savings

One of the primary activities of an SHG is regular savings. Members contribute a fixed amount of money at regular intervals. Although individual contributions may be small, collective savings can gradually create a significant group fund.

The practice of savings is important for rural women because it encourages financial discipline. Many women may not have previously maintained personal savings. SHGs provide a structured mechanism for saving money.

Savings can also improve financial security. Small amounts of accumulated savings may be useful during emergencies. The common fund can be used for internal lending. Members may borrow money according to group rules and repay the loan over time.

Internal lending may help women address immediate financial needs without relying entirely on moneylenders. This can reduce the burden associated with high-interest informal borrowing.

The savings process also gives women practical experience in financial management. Members learn about contributions, repayments and record keeping.

This knowledge can improve financial literacy. Women may become more familiar with basic financial concepts and develop greater confidence in managing money.

Economic empowerment does not necessarily mean that every woman becomes financially wealthy. It means increasing women's capacity to manage resources and participate in economic decisions.

Through regular savings, women can gradually develop a sense of financial responsibility. This can contribute to greater confidence and independence.

6 Access to credit and financial inclusion

Access to credit is an important component of economic empowerment. Poor rural women often face difficulties in obtaining formal loans because they may lack collateral, documentation or an established relationship with banks.

SHGs can create opportunities for financial inclusion. Collective savings and group functioning may help women develop connections with formal financial institutions.

Access to credit can enable women to invest in productive activities. Loans may be used for agriculture, livestock, small businesses and other livelihood activities.

For example, a rural woman may use a loan to purchase a sewing machine and start tailoring work. Another member may invest in livestock or a small retail activity.

The availability of credit can increase women's economic opportunities. Instead of depending entirely on family members for financial support, women may develop independent sources of income.

However, access to credit alone does not guarantee empowerment. The purpose for which the loan is used is important.

Loans used for productive activities may generate income. On the other hand, loans used only for consumption may not necessarily create long-term economic benefits.

Therefore, financial assistance should be combined with training and guidance. Women require information about viable livelihood opportunities and financial management.

Financial inclusion should also include access to savings facilities, banking services and financial literacy. Women need the ability to understand financial decisions.

When women gain greater knowledge of financial systems, their confidence in interacting with banks and institutions may improve.

7 SHGs and income generation

Income generation is one of the most visible dimensions of socio-economic empowerment. An independent source of income can improve women's position within the household and community.

SHG members may engage in a variety of economic activities. These may include dairy farming, poultry farming, tailoring, handicrafts, food processing and small-scale enterprises.

The choice of livelihood activity should depend on local resources and market opportunities. A livelihood activity that is suitable in one area may not be appropriate in another.

For example, women living in areas with strong agricultural resources may find opportunities in food processing or livestock-related activities. Women in other areas may engage in handicrafts or service-based activities.

Income-generating activities can provide women with personal earnings. Even a modest income can contribute to household expenditure.

Women may use their income for children's education, food, health care and other household needs. This can increase their participation in family decisions.

Income can also improve women's self-esteem. A woman who contributes economically to her household may experience greater confidence.

However, the sustainability of income-generating activities is important. Many SHG enterprises face difficulties because of limited access to markets.

Production alone is not sufficient. Women also require information about product quality, packaging, pricing and marketing. Therefore, livelihood development should focus not only on providing loans but also on developing market linkages.

8 Development of entrepreneurship

SHGs can encourage entrepreneurship among rural women. Entrepreneurship refers to the ability to identify opportunities, organize resources and undertake economic activities.

Many rural women possess traditional skills. These may include cooking, stitching, weaving, food preservation and agricultural knowledge. SHGs can help transform some of these skills into income-generating activities.

Group-based enterprises may reduce individual risk. Members can share responsibilities and resources.

For example, several women may work together in food processing or handicraft production. Collective production can improve efficiency.

Entrepreneurship development requires training. Women may require knowledge about business planning, accounting and marketing. Leadership development is also important. A successful enterprise requires planning and coordination.

SHGs can provide a learning environment in which women gain experience through practical activities. Members learn from their own experiences and from each other.

Entrepreneurship can contribute to economic empowerment because it creates opportunities for independent income generation.

However, entrepreneurship should not be imposed on women without considering local conditions. Development programmes should identify the interests and capabilities of women.

Market-oriented planning is necessary. A product should have potential buyers. Without access to markets, even well-produced goods may not generate sufficient income.

9 Improvement in financial literacy

Financial literacy is an important but sometimes neglected dimension of women's empowerment. Many rural women may have limited experience with formal financial institutions.

SHG participation can provide practical exposure to financial activities. Members become familiar with savings, loans and repayments.

The maintenance of group records can also improve organizational knowledge. Members may learn how to record financial transactions.

Women who participate in financial activities may become more confident in dealing with banks.

Financial literacy can improve household financial planning. Women may become more aware of the importance of savings and responsible borrowing.

This can reduce vulnerability to financial crises. Families with better financial planning may be better prepared for emergencies.

However, financial literacy should be promoted systematically. Training should be provided in simple and understandable forms. Women should understand the purpose of loans, repayment responsibilities and the risks associated with excessive borrowing. Financial empowerment requires the ability to make informed decisions rather than simply receiving access to money.

10 Social empowerment through collective participation

The effectiveness of SHGs extends beyond economic development. Regular group meetings can contribute to women's social empowerment.

Many rural women may have limited opportunities for social interaction outside their families. SHG meetings provide a legitimate public space for women.

Women can meet regularly and discuss common issues. This can reduce social isolation. Group discussions may include topics related to health, education, sanitation and family welfare.

Through interaction, women may gain awareness about social issues. They may share information about government programmes and public services.

Collective participation can also strengthen solidarity. Women may begin to support each other during difficult situations. The group may become a source of emotional support. Members may discuss personal and family problems with trusted women.

Social empowerment also involves the ability to express opinions. SHG meetings can provide opportunities for women to speak and participate in discussions.

This experience may gradually influence women's participation in other social institutions.

Thus, SHGs can contribute to the development of social capital. Relationships of trust and cooperation can become important resources for rural communities.

11 Self-confidence and personal empowerment

Self-confidence is a major component of empowerment. A woman may possess skills and knowledge but still hesitate to participate because of low confidence.

SHG participation can create opportunities for personal development. Women may be encouraged to speak during meetings and participate in decisions.

Initially, some members may remain silent. However, regular participation can gradually reduce hesitation. Women may also gain confidence through successful economic activities. Earning income can create a sense of achievement. Interaction with banks and government institutions can further increase confidence. Personal empowerment may also involve changes in self-perception. Women may begin to recognize their own abilities. The group environment is important in this process. Support from other members can encourage women to take new responsibilities.

Leadership opportunities can be particularly significant. Women who become group leaders may develop communication and organizational skills.

These changes can influence other areas of life. A woman who gains confidence through group participation may become more active in family and community decisions.

12 Participation in household decision-making

Women's participation in household decision-making is an important indicator of empowerment.

Economic dependency may reduce women's influence over household decisions. When women contribute to family income, their participation may increase.

SHG membership can improve women's financial knowledge and confidence. This may strengthen their ability to participate in decisions.

Women may become more involved in decisions related to household expenditure and savings. They may also participate in decisions regarding children's education and health care.

However, the relationship between income and decision-making is not always automatic. Social and cultural norms can continue to influence power relations.

A woman may earn income but still have limited control over its use. Therefore, empowerment should involve changes in attitudes and relationships within households. SHGs can contribute indirectly by increasing women's confidence and collective awareness. When women discuss common experiences, they may become more aware of their rights and capabilities. ———

13 Leadership development among rural women

Leadership development is another important contribution of SHGs.

A group requires members to take responsibility for different activities. Someone may organize meetings, maintain records or coordinate with institutions.

These responsibilities create opportunities for leadership. Women who previously had limited public roles may develop confidence in organizing others.

Leadership development can also improve communication skills. Women learn to explain issues and participate in collective discussions.

Democratic functioning is important for leadership development. Leadership should not remain concentrated in one individual. Rotation of responsibilities can provide opportunities for more members. Training programmes can further strengthen leadership capacity.

Women leaders can become important role models in their communities. Their participation may encourage other women to become active.

Thus, SHGs can contribute to the development of grassroots women leadership.

14 Health and educational awareness

SHG meetings can be used as platforms for spreading awareness about health and education. Rural women may discuss maternal health, child nutrition and sanitation. Awareness programmes can provide information about preventive health practices.

Education is also an important topic. Women may become more aware of the importance of sending children, especially girls, to school.

Economic empowerment can support educational investment. Additional household income may help families meet educational expenses. However, awareness is necessary along with financial resources. SHGs can also promote adult learning and literacy programmes. Women who develop literacy skills may become more capable of accessing information. Health and education contribute to long-term empowerment because they improve human capabilities. Therefore, SHGs should not focus exclusively on financial activities.

15 SHGs and community development

SHGs can contribute to broader community development. When women organize collectively, they may identify problems affecting their communities. These problems may include sanitation, drinking water and access to services. Collective action can improve communication between community members and local institutions. Women may become more active participants in community-level

discussions. The collective strength of a group can make it easier to communicate local concerns. SHGs can also create networks between different groups. Federations and larger networks may strengthen collective representation. Community development becomes more effective when local people participate actively. Women's participation is particularly important because women possess direct knowledge of many household and community problems. Therefore, SHGs can contribute to participatory rural development.

16 Role of SHGs in reducing economic dependency

Economic dependency is one of the major barriers to women's empowerment. Women without independent income may depend entirely on other family members. SHG-based savings and livelihood activities can create opportunities for income generation. Even a small independent income may have psychological and social significance. Economic contribution can improve women's confidence. Women may also develop greater awareness about financial planning. However, reducing dependency requires sustainable economic opportunities. Short-term loans alone may not create lasting change. Women require skills, markets and institutional support. The goal should be to strengthen women's long-term economic capacity. Economic empowerment should also involve access to productive resources. Women need opportunities to participate in economic activities according to their interests and skills.

17 Effectiveness of SHGs: Major indicators

The effectiveness of SHGs should be evaluated through multiple indicators.

The first indicator is financial participation. Regular savings and responsible borrowing demonstrate the functioning of the group.

The second indicator is income generation. It is important to examine whether women have developed sustainable livelihood opportunities.

The third indicator is participation. Effective SHGs encourage members to attend meetings and participate in decisions. The fourth indicator is self-confidence. Women should become more comfortable expressing opinions.

The fifth indicator is decision-making. Changes in women's participation in household and community decisions can indicate empowerment.

The sixth indicator is leadership. Effective groups provide opportunities for women to develop organizational skills. The seventh indicator is social awareness. Members should gain information about health, education and social rights.

The eighth indicator is institutional linkage. Strong connections with financial institutions and development agencies can improve sustainability.

Thus, effectiveness should not be measured only by financial transactions.

A group may have a large amount of savings but limited social participation. Such a group may be financially active without achieving broader empowerment.

True socio-economic empowerment requires improvements in both economic and social dimensions.

18 Challenges faced by self-help groups

Despite their potential, SHGs face several challenges.

One major challenge is irregular participation. Some members may not attend meetings regularly because of household responsibilities.

Another challenge is limited literacy. Members may experience difficulty in maintaining records.

Leadership problems can also affect group functioning. If leadership becomes concentrated, other members may not participate actively.

Lack of training is another significant issue. Women may receive loans without adequate knowledge of livelihood management. Marketing difficulties can reduce the sustainability of enterprises. Many women possess skills but lack access to customers. Transportation and limited market information may create additional difficulties. Some SHGs may depend heavily on external agencies. This dependency can reduce sustainability. Social restrictions may also affect women's participation. Women may experience resistance when they attempt to participate in economic or public activities. Financial problems may arise if loans are not repaid. Poor record keeping can also create conflicts. These challenges demonstrate that SHGs require continuous support and capacity building.

19 Role of social work in strengthening SHGs

Social work can play an important role in strengthening SHGs. The social worker can function as a facilitator rather than simply as an authority. The first role is community mobilization. Social workers can help women understand the importance of collective organization. The second role is capacity building. Training can be provided in leadership, communication and financial management. Social workers can also promote awareness about social issues. They may organize educational programmes related to health and gender equality. Another important role is facilitating institutional linkages. Social workers can help groups connect with financial institutions and government services. They can also assist women in identifying appropriate livelihood opportunities. Group work methods are particularly relevant. Social workers can facilitate participation and cooperation. Casework may also be useful when individual members experience personal difficulties. Community organization methods can strengthen collective action. Advocacy can be used to address structural barriers. The social work approach emphasizes participation and empowerment. Therefore, social workers should encourage women to take responsibility rather than creating dependency.

20 Suggestions for improving the effectiveness of SHGs

The effectiveness of SHGs can be improved through several measures. First, regular training should be provided. Training should include financial literacy and leadership development. Second, livelihood activities should be based on local resources. Programmes should examine market opportunities before promoting enterprises. Third, marketing support should be strengthened. Women require assistance with product development and pricing. Fourth, digital literacy should be promoted. Access to digital information can improve awareness of markets and services. Fifth, record-keeping systems should be strengthened. Transparent records can reduce conflicts. Sixth, leadership responsibilities should be shared. Rotation can promote wider participation. Seventh, awareness programmes should address gender discrimination. Economic empowerment should be combined with social empowerment. Eighth, institutional support should be long-term. SHGs may

require continued guidance. Ninth, monitoring should focus on empowerment outcomes. The success of SHGs should not be measured only through savings. Finally, women should participate in planning programmes. Development initiatives are more likely to succeed when they reflect women's needs.

21 Future prospects of SHGs

SHGs have significant potential for contributing to rural development. Their future effectiveness will depend on their ability to adapt to changing conditions. Economic opportunities are changing. Women may require new skills and access to wider markets. Digital technology can create opportunities. However, technology should be introduced with appropriate training. Collective enterprises may become more important. Groups can potentially develop larger networks. Federation and networking can strengthen collective bargaining. Future SHG programmes should adopt an integrated approach. Financial inclusion should be combined with education and skills. Health awareness and social rights should also be included. The ultimate objective should be sustainable empowerment. Women should develop the capacity to make informed choices.

22 Conclusion

Self-Help Groups have emerged as an important instrument for improving the socio-economic empowerment of rural women. Their significance lies in the fact that they encourage women to organize collectively and participate actively in their own development.

The SHG approach recognizes that rural women should not be treated merely as beneficiaries of welfare programmes. Women possess knowledge, skills and the capacity to contribute to their own development when appropriate opportunities are available.

The economic contribution of SHGs is particularly important. Regular savings and access to credit can improve financial security. Women may obtain opportunities for income generation and entrepreneurship.

However, the effectiveness of SHGs extends beyond economic benefits. Participation in group meetings can improve social interaction. Women may develop greater confidence and leadership skills. They may become more aware of health, education and social issues. Participation in collective decision-making can influence women's ability to participate in household and community decisions. SHGs can also reduce social isolation by providing women with a collective platform. The group creates opportunities for mutual support. Women can identify common problems and develop collective responses. This collective dimension is one of the greatest strengths of the SHG approach. Nevertheless, SHGs are not automatically successful. Their effectiveness depends on the quality of group functioning and the availability of training. Sustainable livelihood opportunities are essential. Access to markets is equally important. Without adequate institutional support, some groups may face difficulties. The evaluation of SHGs should therefore adopt a broader perspective. Success should not be measured only by the amount of savings or credit. It should also examine changes in women's confidence and social participation. Economic independence and decision-making are important indicators. Leadership and awareness are also essential. From a social work perspective, SHGs represent an important model of empowerment-oriented practice. They are based on participation and collective action. Social workers can play an important role in facilitating group development. The objective should be to strengthen women's capacities. Rural development requires the active

participation of women. No society can achieve inclusive development when women remain economically dependent.

Self-Help Groups can contribute to creating conditions in which rural women become more active participants in economic and social life.

The future potential of SHGs lies in integrating financial inclusion with capacity building. Skill development and market access should be strengthened. Social awareness should also be included. Women should be provided opportunities to develop leadership.

In conclusion, Self-Help Groups can be highly effective instruments of socio-economic empowerment when they function as more than savings and credit institutions. Their real strength lies in collective solidarity, participation and the development of women's capabilities. By strengthening women's economic independence, social confidence, leadership and decision-making capacity, SHGs can contribute significantly to the transformation of rural communities and the promotion of gender-inclusive development.

References

[1] Bhasin K (2008). What is Patriarchy?. *New Delhi: Women Unlimited*.

[2] Desai, V. & Potter, R. B. (Ed.) (2014). The Companion to Development Studies. *London: Routledge*.

[3] Dreze, J. & Sen, A. (2013). An Uncertain Glory: India and Its Contradictions. *Princeton: Princeton University Press*.

[4] Kabeer N (1999). Resources, Agency, Achievements: Reflections on the Measurement of Women's Empowerment. *Development and Change*, 30(3), 435–464.

[5] Kumar S (2016). Women Empowerment and Rural Development. *New Delhi: Concept Publishing*.

[6] Mayoux L (2001). Tackling the Down Side: Social Capital, Women's Empowerment and Micro-Finance in Cameroon. *Development and Change*, 32(3), 435–464.

[7] Narayan D (Ed.) (2005). Measuring Empowerment: Cross-Disciplinary Perspectives. *Washington*, DC: World Bank.

[8] Sen A (1999). Development as Freedom. *New Delhi: Oxford University Press*.

[9] Sharma A (2019). Women, Microfinance and Rural Development in India. *New Delhi: Academic Publications*.

[10] United Nations (2015). Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. *New York: United Nations*.

[11] World Bank (2012). World Development Report 2012: Gender Equality and Development. *Washington*, DC: World Bank.

[12] Yadav P (2017). Self-Help Groups and Women's Empowerment in Rural India. *Journal of Rural Development Studies*, 8(2), 45–58.