

# Empowering the Backbone of Uttarakhand's Agriculture: Transforming Women Farmers Through Skills, Security, and Leadership

**Sangya Singh<sup>1</sup>, Seema Kwatra<sup>2</sup>, and Pratibha Pandey<sup>3</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>Young Professional-II, AICRP-WIA, College of Community Science, G.B.Pant University of Agriculture and Technology, Pantnagar

<sup>2</sup>Professor, Deptt. Of Resource Management and Consumer Science, College of Community Science, G.B.Pant University of Agriculture and Technology, Pantnagar

<sup>3</sup>Research Scholar, College of Community Science, G.B.Pant University of Agriculture and Technology, Pantnagar

\*Corresponding Author: [sangyachauhan@gmail.com](mailto:sangyachauhan@gmail.com)

Women play a vital role in agriculture, particularly in rural and hilly regions of Uttarakhand, where they contribute significantly to farming activities, livestock management, and household work. Despite their central role, women farmers often face several challenges, including limited access to resources, technology, training, and decision-making opportunities. The need for empowering women farmers through targeted programs focusing on skill development, security, and capacity building is more pressing than ever.

## Role of Women in Agriculture in Uttarakhand

In Uttarakhand's hilly terrain, women farmers are the backbone of agriculture. They engage in sowing, weeding, harvesting, and processing crops, often working long hours to support their families. Besides agriculture, they contribute to dairy farming, livestock rearing, and agroforestry. However, most of this work goes unrecognized, as women are often labeled as "helpers" rather than primary farmers, limiting their access to land ownership, credit, and agricultural extension services.

## Challenges Faced by Women Farmers

Despite their significant contribution, women farmers in Uttarakhand face several challenges:

- **Limited Access to Resources:** Land ownership among women is rare, which hinders their access to credit, government schemes, and agricultural inputs.
- **Lack of Technical Knowledge:** Due to social norms and limited outreach of agricultural extension services, women farmers often miss opportunities to upgrade their skills and adopt modern farming techniques.
- **Social Barriers:** Gender roles and societal expectations often restrict women from participating in decision-making and leadership roles in farmer organizations.
- **Vulnerability to Climate Change:** The hilly terrain of Uttarakhand is vulnerable to climate

change, affecting crop yields. Women, who already face resource scarcity, are more susceptible to these changes.

## Skill Development Programs



Skill-building programs aimed at women farmers can play a crucial role in their empowerment. Several government and non-governmental initiatives in Uttarakhand focus on building the capacity of women in agriculture.

1. **Mahila Kisaan Sashaktikaran Pariyojana (MKSP):** This program, part of the National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM), aims to empower women in agriculture by providing them with training in sustainable farming practices, organic farming, and modern techniques. Women farmer groups formed under this scheme have benefited from training in crop diversification, integrated pest management, and water conservation techniques.
2. **Quilling and Craft Skills for Economic Upliftment:** Craft-based skills, such as quilling, have been introduced to women farmers in Uttarakhand as a way to diversify income. These skills allow women to create products that can be sold in local and urban markets, providing financial independence.
3. **Digital Literacy for Women Farmers:** Digital literacy is essential for accessing information about modern agricultural techniques, government schemes, and market trends. Training programs focusing on digital skills

enable women farmers to better manage their farms, access online resources, and connect with markets.

### Security and Social Protection

Ensuring the social and economic security of women farmers is critical for their long-term empowerment. Key initiatives in Uttarakhand that address this aspect include:

1. **Access to Credit:** Women Self-Help Groups (SHGs) under the NRLM provide women farmers with access to credit, enabling them to invest in agriculture, animal husbandry, or small enterprises. Credit linkages with banks also reduce their dependency on informal money lenders.
2. **Legal Land Ownership:** Efforts are being made to promote joint land ownership among women, ensuring they have legal rights to the land they work on. This ownership strengthens their bargaining power and opens up avenues for accessing government schemes.
3. **Health and Safety Measures:** Women working in agriculture are often exposed to physical strain and health risks. Capacity-building programs should integrate health education and provide resources to ensure the physical well-being of women farmers.

### Capacity Building for Leadership

Capacity-building programs are designed to enable women farmers to take on leadership roles within their communities and farmer organizations. The promotion of women's cooperatives and farmer producer organizations (FPOs) has provided women farmers in Uttarakhand with platforms to collectively negotiate better prices for their products, access resources, and share knowledge. Leadership training programs specifically focus on enhancing women's decision-making skills, financial literacy, and confidence to lead farming-related initiatives.

### Case Study: Millet Cultivation Resurgence

The revival of millet cultivation in Uttarakhand marks a significant step toward sustainable agriculture, food security, and women's empowerment in the region. Millets, often referred to as "nutri-cereals," are traditional crops of the hilly areas that have been grown for centuries. Their resilience to adverse climatic conditions like drought, poor soil fertility, and erratic rainfall makes them a valuable crop for the hill farmers of Uttarakhand. However, in recent decades, millet cultivation had declined due to a shift toward cash crops and wheat and rice, supported by government policies.

### Role of Women in Millet Revival

The resurgence of millet cultivation has largely



been driven by women farmers, who are the backbone of agriculture in the Uttarakhand hills. In this region, women are deeply involved in all stages of agriculture—from sowing to harvesting and even marketing. The millet revival initiative has seen these women take on new roles and responsibilities through capacity-building programs and skill-development workshops.

These capacity-building programs are designed to educate women farmers on sustainable agricultural practices that enhance productivity while conserving resources. Training on improved seed selection, soil health management, pest control, and water conservation techniques are imparted to women farmers to increase their efficiency and yield. Seed conservation, an important part of maintaining biodiversity and ensuring the availability of resilient millet varieties, is also a key focus of these programs.

### Economic Empowerment and Value Addition

Beyond cultivation, the initiative emphasizes value addition—processing millet into flour, snacks, and other products that can fetch a higher price in the market. Women are trained in food processing, packaging, and marketing strategies to create millet-based value-added products. These products, which include millet flour, baked goods, and snacks, cater to growing urban demands for nutritious, organic food.

The income generated from selling these products has empowered women economically, giving them a greater role in household decision-making. Many women have formed self-help groups (SHGs) and cooperatives to collectively market their produce and products, providing them with better access to markets and buyers.

### Addressing Food Security

Millet's reintroduction has also helped improve food security in the region. With the climate-resilient nature of millet crops, farmers are better prepared to face unpredictable weather patterns.

Millets are highly nutritious and provide essential nutrients like fiber, protein, and minerals. This ensures that families in these hilly areas have access to a steady supply of nutrient-rich food, which is particularly important in combating malnutrition.

### Challenges Faced

Despite these successes, challenges remain. Women farmers still face limited access to markets, capital, and infrastructure, which can hinder their progress. Traditional gender roles and responsibilities also limit their participation in training and development programs. Addressing these issues requires continuous support from government policies, NGOs, and local organizations to provide

women with the tools, education, and infrastructure they need to succeed.

### Conclusion

Empowering women farmers through skills development, social security, and capacity-building programs is essential for the holistic development of Uttarakhand's agriculture sector. Programs focusing on technical training, legal rights, financial security, and leadership can enable women farmers to overcome the challenges they face, contributing to sustainable and inclusive agricultural growth. Ensuring that women have access to these resources will not only uplift individual farmers but also strengthen the entire community, leading to more resilient and prosperous rural economies.

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