

JOURNAL OF NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

PEER REVIEWED, INDEXED & REFEREED BI-ANNUAL INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL

ISSN 0972-8309

<https://www.jndmeerut.org>

[Vol. 39, Special Monsoon Issue, 2026]

<https://doi.org/10.62047/JND.2026.09.15.194>

Women's Empowerment through Commercial Vegetable Farming: A Case Study of Panchkhal Municipality

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Abstract

This research presents a case study conducted in a semi-urban area in Nepal to understand women's empowerment through seasonal or non-seasonal vegetable farming. Drawing on feminist theories and a gender analysis framework, this study explores women's empowerment, household decision-making, financial independence, and social participation. To support this research, the study used both descriptive and exploratory research designs. Data were collected through observation, questionnaires, and interview schedules. The field study was conducted around the Hokse, Panchkhal Municipality, Kavre, Nepal, where most women are involved in vegetable farming. The study selected 26 women vegetable farmers. Women's involvement in commercial vegetable farming increases income, boosts self-confidence, and encourages them to improve their skills. The findings show that women are viewed as role models in their communities and are actively involved in household decision-making. Their social participation increases after vegetable farming. Women's earnings inspire more women and other community members.

Keywords

Women, Empowerment, Commercial vegetable farming, Decision-making, Social participation.

Centre For Studies of National Development, Meerut

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1. Introduction

Government, non-government organizations, other organizations and agencies have been working to empower women in Nepal. Agriculture has always been a source of income for Nepalese people. Women are leading in agriculture and make a remarkable contribution to household food and nutrition security in developing countries. They make up almost half of the agricultural labor force (World Bank, 2017). Although they contribute significantly to agriculture, women have less access to resources than men, especially land. Over the past two decades, the number of women has been increasing; they have been controlling and involved in family farmland, but women's land proprietorship has not grown. Female land ownership has increased by less than 3%, from 10% in 1995 to 12.8% in 2015 (Mohanty and Bhandari, 2014).

Women's empowerment in Nepal is tied to social, cultural, and economic factors that influence all aspects of women's lives. This affects not only women themselves but also the well-being of their children. They further write that Nepalese women's lives are complex webs of constraints, obligations, and sacrifices, many of which are determined from the day of her birth. The caste or ethnic group she is born into determines her position, status, and freedom (Dhakal and Seikh, 1997). Tharan (1997) further states that empowerment brings a new understanding, the ability to acquire new skills, confidence in solving problems, and conflict-resolution skills that strengthen organizations, individuals, and collectives. We do not view empowerment as hierarchical, exploitative power, but as power that leads to democratization and builds new mechanisms for collective responsibility, decision-making, and accountability.

Women's empowerment has five segments: women's pride; their right to have and to assure alternative; their right to have access to chance and supplies; their right to have power to control their own lives, both within and outside the home; and their ability to influence the direction of social change to discover a more just social and economic level, inside nation and universally (UNDP, 1996). As times evolve, women have realized their power. Various organizations have provided agricultural training and skills-development programs nationwide. These programs have enhanced women's ability and confidence by providing technical and other knowledge on farming, animal husbandry, and other small-scale businesses. This began the revolution for women's empowerment. Beyond household activities, women have become farming professionals and economically independent. As men

migrated to seek alternative livelihoods, women took on tasks previously done by men, such as land preparation, harvesting, post-harvest operations, and marketing produce. Women were the pioneers of modern agriculture, which began with the domestication of plants in their territories (Lal, 2009)

The increasing takeover of roles by women at both the household and community level in the absence of men should have created better opportunities for them. It should have created opportunities for them to gain empowerment, build capacity, and, more importantly, become entrepreneurial farmers rather than family farm laborers. However, social and cultural factors, along with a non-supportive policy and institutional environment, have not responded to the need to empower agriculture-dependent women to increase their ownership and control over productive resources (Tamang *et al.*, 2014). Most importantly, systematic change in laws and policies at the national level designed to advance gender equality across the socio-economic and political spectrum provides a conducive environment for women to challenge restrictive socio-cultural practices and seek program support; the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nepal in 2015 forbids most forms of gender-based discrimination and recognizes women's socio-economic and political rights.

Further, Nepal's agriculture development strategy 2015-2035 strongly advocates and promotes policies and programs to enhance women's role in various aspects of the market-based agriculture system (Balayar and Mazur, 2022). A range of new and inexpensive agricultural machinery, adapted to local conditions, could potentially enhance productivity and enable women to gain new skills and knowledge (ICIMOD, 2014). Agriculture has become a source of income for most of the people in rural and urban areas. Demand for vegetables and interest in vegetable production among women has been increasing day by day because of population growth, urbanization, awareness of health, irrigation facilities, promotion by government and NGOs, high returns, development of improved and hybrid varieties, road networks connecting markets, low economies of scale, credit availability from GO/NGOs and institutions (Malla, 2021).

Women in urban areas are also interested in farming. They can generate income for their families and support local food security. As a result, they are now actively involved in household decision-making and planning, and they are gaining more respect and support from the community. Women farmers in Panchkhal have produced off-season and seasonal vegetables for sale and earned cash income. Because gender-sensitive data is lacking, women's contributions and concerns remain invisible. Because women play crucial roles but still face inferior status in many areas, this study focuses on gender dynamics, women's empowerment, and access to women's income. As men migrate to seek alternative livelihoods, women have taken on tasks traditionally done by men, such as land preparation, harvesting, post-harvest operations, and marketing of produce. Women pioneered modern agriculture, which began with the domestication of plants in their territories (Lal, 2009).

2. Literature Review

2.1 Feminist Theory

Numerous feminist theories have emerged to explain gender equality, and each is rooted in different ideologies. Liberal feminism advocates gradual changes in women's political, economic, and social status, emphasizing equal opportunities and eliminating gender-based discrimination (Ritzer, 1992). Marxist feminism combines Marxist class analysis with feminist social perspective, highlighting the interplay of class and gender inequality (Barrett, 1981; Mitchell, 1975; Sargent, 1981). Radical feminism focuses on the sex/gender system as the fundamental cause of women's oppression, delving into the dynamics of gender relationships (Jaggar, 1983). Socialist feminists critique the gender-blindness of Marxist feminism and argue for the simultaneous overthrow of capitalism and patriarchy (Ritzer, 1992).

Third-wave feminism emphasizes the experiences of marginalized groups within the feminist movement, such as women of color, and highlights women's diversity (Ritzer, 1992). The empowerment approach recognizes differences among Third World women because of caste, class, and ethnicity, and identifies women's power with their increased capacity for collective action, self-reliance, and internal strength. Empowerment is seen as the right to make life decisions and to drive change by gaining control over essential material and non-material resources. The aim is not to increase women's status relative to men but to improve women's quality of life through redistributing power within society and between societies. Thus, this approach questions the assumption that women need to be integrated into development. Women, by the nature of their social and economic roles, are already integrated into the development process and survival of their communities. They need development policies where they have a say in the kind of society they want (Moser, 1989). Third world minorities feminism focuses on empowering minority women through modest political and economic concessions (Arquiza, 2012).

2.2 Gender Analysis framework

Gender analysis frameworks are essential tools for examining gender differences and inequalities in society and understanding their implications for development. These frameworks provide a structured approach to analyze various aspects of gender dynamics. Five commonly used frameworks have emerged: the Harvard Analytical framework, also known as the gender roles framework, emphasizes allocating resources to both women's and men's development efforts, highlighting the efficiency of this approach (Overholt, 1985). The Moser gender planning framework, developed by Caroline Moser, recognizes women's roles in production and reproduction, and community management. It assesses their specific needs and examines their access to resources (Moser, 1983).

The gender Analysis Matrix is a community-based tool that encourages active participation and engagement from the community. It helps identify gender differences and challenge prevailing assumptions about gender roles and responsibilities (Parker, 1993). The women's Empowerment framework,

formulated by Sara Hlupekil Longwe (1995), takes a political perspective and emphasizes that women's poverty results from oppression and exploitation. It proposes five levels of equality-control, participation, conscientization, access, and welfare-to guide the assessment of development interventions (Longwe, 1995). Naila Kabeer's Social Relations Approach adopts a structural feminist perspective. It goes beyond individual roles and analyzes gender inequalities within broader social and institutional contexts, aiming to identify and address factors that constrain women (Kabeer, 1994). These frameworks offer valuable analytical tools for understanding the complexities of gender dynamics and informing the design of inclusive and gender responsive development policies and interventions.

3. Methodology

This research is carried out among the people of Hokse Panchkal Municipality, Kavrepalanchok District, Nepal. The study adopts a descriptive research design to describe the dominant conditions of women in the research area, and an exploratory design to examine women's empowerment through vegetable farming in the research area. The study used primary data and interviews. Out of 49 households, 26 were selected through a simple random sampling method. The study used both primary and secondary data sources, including observation and interview questionnaires. The study used observation to understand the lifestyle and situation of the study area, while interviews gathered qualitative data on women's empowerment. Questionnaires collected information on social and economic conditions, family size, marital status, occupation, and education.

The collected data were analyzed using descriptive and simple statistical methods, involving identifying relevant themes and concepts, organizing materials accordingly, and developing generalizations. Descriptive analysis covered the village's physical setting, climate, economic conditions, and agricultural system. Demographic features were analyzed descriptively and statistically. Quantitative data were analyzed using a computer software package

4. Data presentation and Analysis

4.1 Change in Economic Status of Women after Involvement in Vegetable Farming

Women started generating income for themselves and their households through vegetable farming. They spent this income on children's education and food and saved the rest in microfinance. So, the saved money could be used for different purposes to expand and extend their economic sources

4.1.1 Monthly Average Income

Most of the respondents had been depended on their families to meet their basic needs and start their businesses. Some women were housewives, who used to get limited money for their household, while a few of them were wage laborers and had awful conditions to sustain their family. Now their income has changed significantly as is evident from table-1 on the next page.

Table-1: Average Monthly Income after engaging in Vegetable Farming

Average Monthly Income	No of Respondents	Percent
2,000-4,000	5	19.23
4,000-8,000	7	26.92
8,000-10,000	10	38.46
10,000 above	4	15.38
Total	26	100.00

Source: Field Survey 2026.

The above table shows that nearly one-fifth respondents (19.23 percent) had an income of 2,000-4,000, nearly one-fourth (26.92 percent) had an income within 4,000-8,000, whereas a little more than one-third (38.46 percent) had an income from 8,000 to 10,000. Those with monthly average income bracket of more than 10,000 were hardly one-seventh (15.38 percent) of the selected sample.

4.1.2 Buying Land from Vegetable Farming

Most of the selected women respondents bought land with money collected from vegetable farming. They have been spending a certain amount of money on other household expenses. It has been easier for the women who have been engaged in farming for several years to buy land as is evident from the following table:

Table-2: Buying Land from Earnings of Vegetable Farming

Brought land	No of Respondents	Percent
Yes	19	65.39
No	9	34.61
Total	26	100.00

Source: Field Survey, 2026.

Data contained in the above table show that nearly one-third (34.61 percent) selected women claimed they did not own land after engaging in income generation, while remaining majority of nearly two-third (65.39 percent) were able to buy more land after doing their business of vegetable farming.

4.1.3 Women's Decision on Buying Jewelry

After becoming involved in agribusiness, women are economically active and thus want to buy and wear valuable ornaments for special functions as well as on casual days. Most have saved money from their business (as is evident from table-3), and together with other household members, they could buy jewelry. So this decision of theirs is equally important.

Table-3: Women's Decision on Buying Jewelry

Decision on Buying Jewelry	No of Respondents	Percent
Yes	20	76.92
No	6	23.08
Total	26	100.00

Source: Field Survey, 2026.

Data contained in Table-3 shows that a little more than three-fourth (76.92 percent) of the selected women responded that they can now decide to buy ornaments for their family, while the remaining a little less than one-fourth (23.08 percent) said they did not buy valuable items for themselves or other family members.

4.2 Social Empowerment of Women

Through agriculture, women have been able to solve socio-economic and political problems in their family. Furthermore, they have become more aware of their status and organized to improve it and access opportunities; so that women take control of their lives, set their own strategies, lifestyle, and systems, gain knowledge and skills, and prepare to solve their problems. For this change, their family, friends, women's groups, and training from local corporations have assisted them.

4.2.1 Increase in Social Participation

When women are involved in different functions and social activities, it signifies women's empowerment. Most are involved in women's groups or co-operatives, which provide them with skills and training to run their businesses smoothly. From time to time, seminars, workshops, and interaction programs are conducted so women can raise their voices for their needs, participate equally in social activities with male members, and learn time management, marketing techniques, and proper money management. Previously, women were hesitant to explain their needs and ideas to their family, but now the situation has changed.

Table-4: Increase in Social Participation

Social Participation has Increased	No. of Respondent	Percent
Yes	19	73.07
No	7	26.92
Total	26	100.00

Source: Field Survey, 2026.

It may be observed that a little less than three-fourth (73.07 percent) of the selected women did confirm that they have now started participating in social functions/activities more in their locality, while remaining little more than one-fourth (26.92 percent) reported no increase in such involvement.

4.2.2 Increase in Speaking Skills

Selected Respondents stated that after starting their business, they no longer felt shy or awkward about speaking in public; they can convince new customers on their own. Some have gained self-assurance from the organization.

Table-5: Increase in Speaking Skills

Increase in Speaking Skills	No of Respondent	Percent
Yes	20	76.92
No	6	23.07
Total	26	100.00

Source: Field Survey, 2026.

As is evident from table-5, a little more than three-fourth (76.92 percent) of the selected women responded that they had improved speaking skills, while the remaining little less than one-fourth (23.07 percent) had not improved. Some learned on their own, while others learned through the internet and training.

4.2.3 Change in Household Decision-making

The family's decision-making system has changed considerably after women began earning an income of their own. Women are now involved in social functions, well-spoken, and able to voice their ideas and thoughts to other family members. They now have greater involvement in minor and major household decisions as is evident from the following table:

Table-6: Change in Household Decision-making

Household Decision-making	No of Respondent	Percent
Yes	21	80.76
No	5	19.23
Total	26	100.00

Source: Field Survey, 2026.

The above table shows that over-whelming selected women farmers (80.76 percent) were now actively involved in household decision-making, while the remaining nearly one-fifth (19.23 percent) were not involved in assisting their families in economic or other decisions.

4.2.4 Change of Husband's Behaviour

Most of the selected women claimed that there was a tremendous change in their Husbands' behaviour, such as they now being more supportive; they consulted with their wives to make minor or major household decisions, and they started to help even in the kitchen, look after their children, and help respondents in farming as is evident from the following table:.

Table-7: Change in Husband's Behaviour

Husband's Behaviour Changed	No of Respondent	Percent
Yes	24	92.40
No	2	7.60
Total	26	100.00

Source: Field Survey, 2026.

Like household decision-making, an over-whelming majority of selected women (92.4 percent) reported that there was considerable change in their husbands' behaviour, while a negligible proportion of them (7.6 percent) reported no change in their behaviour.

5. Major Findings

Major findings that emerge in this study may be summarized as under:

- Women's involvement in commercial vegetable farming increases income, boosts self-confidence, and encourages skill improvement.

- ▶▶ Monthly Average income after involving vegetable farming changed. Out of 26 respondents, 19.23 percent had an income of 2,000-4,000, 26.92 percent had an income within 4,000-8,000, whereas 38.46 percent had an income from 8,000 to 10,000, and 15.38% had above 10,000 average monthly income.
- ▶▶ Women gave their ideas and thoughts on major and minor household decisions. Their husbands and other members changed their attitude and started supporting women at every step.
- ▶▶ The family decision-making system changed considerably after women began earning. Out of 26 respondents, 80.76% of them were actively involved in household decision-making, while the other 19.23% of women farmers were not involved.
- ▶▶ Being commercial vegetable farmers, women have found that their mobility outside their residential areas has increased, and they have been participating in social functions of society.
- ▶▶ Most of them have strengthened their decision-making power over where and how to use money and can use their income for household expenditures, children's studies, buying land, and purchasing jewelry.
- ▶▶ Women had economic autonomy, their own savings, and could buy needed items. No one interfered with her decision.
- ▶▶ Social participation increased after vegetable farming; of 26 respondents, 73.07% increased their active involvement in social activities.
- ▶▶ This research showed that, out of 26 respondents, 92.4% reported a change in their husbands' behaviour, while 7.6% reported no change.
- ▶▶ Most found that their shyness and hesitant behaviour had decreased. They can convince and attract more customers.
- ▶▶ Women that they were viewed as role models in their communities; women earning income inspires more women, and more community members are open to letting their wives or daughters-in-law be involved in vegetable farming

6. Conclusion

This study explored women's empowerment through commercial vegetable farming in Hokse, Panchkhal in Nepal. It mainly focused on the economic and social aspects of women's vegetable farming in the peri-urban areas of Hokse, Panchkhal, Kavre Districts. Most of the selected women used loans to start their own enterprise. As a result, women improved their economic status; they became more confident and self-dependent in doing different things in their community such as increase in social participation. Their increased income, participation in household decision-making, and considerable change in husbands' behaviour in helping in daily domestic chores and equally looking after the children, amply demonstrate their march towards empowerment.

This research concludes that vegetable farming has made a remarkable change in respondents' lives and created a positive economic impact on society by strengthening women's capacity. These income-generating business ideas have been important for the poor, needy, and women who want to sustain their lives without depending on their partners or family. This study aimed to analyze the socio-economic conditions of women in the past and today after becoming involved in commercial farming. Overall, we observed substantial changes in family decision-making after they became self-reliant. They also possess better knowledge about vegetable production, bargaining practices, and selling. These women are also highly effective in sharing skills they learned with other women in the community, motivating them to pursue or continue vegetable farming and convincing their families of their decision. All these changes lead us to conclude that commercial vegetable farming has become a powerful tool for Women's Empowerment. However, more such in-depth case studies are needed in other municipalities of Nepal to generalize the findings from Panchkhal Municipality.

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