International Journal of Leading Research Publication (IJLRP)

E-ISSN: 2582-8010 ● Website: www.ijlrp.com ● Email: editor@ijlrp.com

The Role of Self-Help Groups in Women's Economic Empowerment: A Study of District Bandipora, Jammu & Kashmir

Umar Ali[1], Nasir Ahmad Zargar[2]

[1]Faculty of Economics and Business, University of Airlangga, Surabaya, Indonesia
[2]Faculty of Economics and Business, University of Airlangga, Surabaya, Indonesia

Abstract:
Self-Help Groups (SHGs) are a leading grassroots mechanism for advancing women's economic empowerment across rural India, yet district-specific evidence from the Kashmir Valley remains scarce. This paper examines the role of SHGs in women's economic empowerment in District Bandipora, a hilly, agrarian, Muslim-majority district with comparatively low female literacy and workforce participation. Using a descriptive-cum-analytical design combining secondary district data with a structured primary survey framework administered across SHGs affiliated with the Jammu & Kashmir Rural Livelihoods Mission (JKRLM) under UMEED, the study evaluates changes in income, savings, asset ownership, credit access, and household decision-making before and after SHG membership, using descriptive statistics, a paired t-test, and correlation analysis. Findings indicate a statistically significant rise in average income and savings and a marked shift from informal moneylenders to formal, SHG-linked credit, alongside a moderate but real improvement in women's decision-making participation. Social and mobility-related empowerment gains remain smaller than economic gains, and membership duration correlates positively with overall empowerment scores. The paper concludes that SHGs have made a measurable contribution to women's economic agency in Bandipora, but that this potential is constrained by weak market linkages, seasonal connectivity disruption, limited product diversification, and residual patriarchal norms. Recommendations include strengthening market linkages, digital and financial literacy training, convergence with UMEED/NRLM frameworks, and targeted support for newer and remote SHG clusters to close the gap between economic and social empowerment outcomes.

Keywords: Self-Help Groups (SHGs); Women's Economic Empowerment; Microfinance; Bandipora; JKRLM; UMEED; NRLM; Jammu and Kashmir; Rural Livelihoods.

1. Introduction

Women's economic empowerment is widely recognised as both an intrinsic development goal and an instrumental driver of household welfare, poverty reduction, and inclusive economic growth (Sen, 1999). Empowerment, in the sense used in this paper, refers to the process by which women gain increased control over economic resources, decision-making authority, and the capacity to exercise choice in matters that affect their lives (Kabeer, 1999). Kabeer (2012) further argues that women's economic empowerment must be understood jointly through access to economic resources and the agency to use them, a framing that links labour-market and enterprise participation directly to inclusive growth. In the Indian context, the

Self-Help Group (SHG) model a small, voluntary association of individuals, typically fifteen to twenty women from similar socio-economic backgrounds, who pool savings and access credit collectively has become the dominant vehicle through which microfinance-led empowerment strategies are delivered at scale (Puhazhendhi & Satyasai, 2000).

The SHG movement in India owes its institutional foundation to the National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD), which piloted the SHG-Bank Linkage Programme (SBLP) in 1992 (NABARD, 2007; NABARD, 2022), and to subsequent national missions such as the Swarnajayanti Gram Swarozgar Yojana (SGSY) and its successor, the National Rural Livelihoods Mission (NRLM), launched in 2011 under the Ministry of Rural Development (Ministry of Rural Development, 2023). Deininger and Liu (2009) note that the scale of India's SHG programme, encompassing tens of millions of women, makes it one of the largest deliberate social-mobilisation interventions in the developing world, while Reddy and Reddy (2012) document substantial inter-state variation in the quality and sustainability of SHGs formed under this framework. In Jammu & Kashmir, the mission is implemented as the Jammu & Kashmir Rural Livelihoods Mission (JKRLM), popularly branded UMEED, which since 2019 has worked to mobilise rural women, particularly from marginalised and economically weaker sections, into SHGs and federated institutions such as Village Organisations (VOs) and Cluster Level Federations (CLFs).

District Bandipora, carved out of the erstwhile Baramulla district in 2007, is a predominantly rural, Muslim-majority district in the Kashmir Valley characterised by an agrarian and horticulture-based economy, significant dependence on Wular Lake-linked fisheries and tourism, difficult winter connectivity, and comparatively low female literacy relative to the national average (Census of India, 2011). These structural features make Bandipora an important, and under-studied, site for examining whether and how SHG-based interventions translate into tangible economic empowerment for women, distinct from more extensively studied plains districts of mainland India.

This paper is motivated by three considerations. First, while a substantial body of literature documents the impact of SHGs on women's empowerment across Indian states (Swain & Wallentin, 2009; Swain & Varghese, 2009; Tesoriero, 2006), and a smaller body addresses the Jammu region and Baramulla district specifically (Mehta, Mishra, & Singh, 2011), district-specific evidence from Bandipora remains scarce. Second, national and state-level averages can mask considerable intra-regional variation in outcomes, particularly in mountainous districts affected by seasonal isolation (Parida & Sinha, 2010). Third, from a policy standpoint, JKRLM/UMEED planners require granular, district-level evidence to calibrate the design of financial literacy, market-linkage, and enterprise-support interventions. The paper therefore undertakes a focused, methodologically explicit examination of the economic empowerment effects of SHG participation among women in Bandipora.

2. Review of Literature

A wide body of research has examined the relationship between SHG participation and women's empowerment, spanning conceptual framing, international microcredit evidence, national-level impact assessment, and region-specific case studies. This section reviews the literature under five heads.

2.1 Conceptual and Theoretical Foundations

Kabeer (1999) offers the most widely cited conceptual framework for empowerment research, defining empowerment as the expansion of people's ability to make strategic life choices, operationalised through the interrelated dimensions of resources, agency, and achievements. This three-dimensional framework underpins the indicator design used in Section 7 of this paper, which distinguishes economic resource indicators (income, savings, assets, credit access) from agency indicators (decision-making participation, mobility, and voice). Sen's (1999) capability approach similarly informs the view, adopted here, that economic empowerment should be assessed not merely by increases in income but by the extent to which women gain genuine capability to convert resources into valued outcomes and choices. Kabeer (2012) extends this framework specifically to labour markets and enterprise development, arguing that economic empowerment requires simultaneous progress on access to resources, agency in decision-making, and structural changes in the rules governing women's economic participation.

2.2 International Microcredit and Empowerment Evidence

Much of the foundational empirical literature on credit-based women's empowerment originates from Bangladesh. Hashemi, Schuler, and Riley (1996), in a landmark study of Grameen Bank and BRAC borrowers, found that group-based credit programmes produced measurable effects across eight distinct dimensions of women's empowerment, attributing Grameen Bank's comparative success to its strong central focus on credit combined with structured group rules and rituals. Schuler and Hashemi (1994) similarly linked credit-programme participation to greater contraceptive use and reproductive decision-making autonomy, while Schuler, Hashemi, Riley, and Akhter (1996) found that group-based credit access was associated with reduced incidence of domestic violence by making women's economic lives more public and socially visible. Pitt and Khandker (1998) provided rigorous quasi-experimental evidence that group-based credit programmes in Bangladesh raised household consumption and that effects were significantly larger when women, rather than men, were the borrowing members. Kabeer (2001), however, cautioned against overstating these effects, arguing in her re-evaluation of loans to rural Bangladeshi women that credit access alone does not automatically translate into empowerment where loan use remains under male control within the household a caution that informs this paper's disaggregation of economic and decision-making empowerment indicators in Section 8.3.

2.3 National and Cross-State Evidence from India

Within India, NABARD's own impact evaluations were among the earliest to document SHG effects at scale: Puhazhendhi and Satyasai (2000) found across multiple states that SHG membership improved members' savings, borrowing capacity, and income-generating asset position relative to non-member households, a finding echoed in Puhazhendhi and Satyasai (2001), who reported measurable economic and social empowerment gains among rural poor SHG members. Deininger and Liu (2009), using a large panel dataset, found that SHG participation in Andhra Pradesh significantly increased household expenditure and asset accumulation, with effects strengthening over time as membership tenure increased. Swain and Wallentin (2009), using a composite empowerment index, found a statistically significant positive change in empowerment among SHG members relative to a control group, while noting that gains were unevenly distributed among members. Swain and Varghese (2009) extended this analysis and found that SHG participation, combined with business training, significantly raised the probability of asset creation among member households. Tesoriero (2006), in a qualitative study of SHGs in South India, documented how sustained group participation strengthened women's community standing and collective bargaining capacity, while Reddy and Reddy (2012) cautioned that the quality and sustainability of SHGs varied considerably across Indian states, with implications for the durability of empowerment outcomes.

Rajendran and Raya (2011), in a study of microfinance-linked SHGs in Vellore district, Tamil Nadu, found that participation improved women's ability to interact with bankers, government officials, and non-governmental organisations, and enhanced their role in decisions regarding children's education, though the study reported comparatively limited gains in broader social empowerment. Bhulal and Kumari (2018), examining the SHG-Bank Linkage Programme in Hamirpur district, Himachal Pradesh, compared the pre- and post-SHG economic status of women members and reported measurable improvements in income, savings capacity, and access to credit. Husain, Mukherjee, and Dutta (2014), addressing a persistent methodological concern in this literature, examined whether observed empowerment gains among SHG members reflected genuine programme impact or self-selection of already-more-empowered women into SHGs, and found evidence of real, though partly self-selection-influenced, empowerment effects a caveat reflected in the limitations discussed in Section 5.6 of this paper.

2.4 Evidence from Jammu & Kashmir

Evidence specific to Jammu & Kashmir remains comparatively limited but is directly relevant to the present study. Mehta, Mishra, and Singh (2011), studying the socio-economic change experienced by vulnerable poor populations in the Jammu region, found that SHGs made an important contribution to socio-economic empowerment and poverty alleviation among women members, concluding that the SHG mechanism aligned well with the broader Millennium Development Goals agenda on gender equality and poverty reduction. A study of the neighbouring Baramulla district similarly reported that participation in SHGs financed through microfinance produced a positive impact on the income, savings, and asset position of women beneficiaries, consistent with findings from other Indian states (IJCRT, 2018).

More recent journalistic and administrative accounts of the UMEED programme document individual enterprise trajectories of SHG-linked women entrepreneurs across Kashmir Valley districts including Baramulla, Budgam, Ganderbal, Bandipora, Kupwara, Shopian, Kulgam, and Anantnag, describing ventures ranging from dairy and milk-collection businesses to handicraft production and tourism-linked micro-enterprises, and noting that the Union Territory's female SHG beneficiaries have ranked among the higher-performing cohorts nationally under the scheme (ANI, 2023). The JKRLM's district-level activities in Bandipora specifically include facilitating micro-enterprise creation, market access for SHG products, cluster-based producer cooperatives, and training, mentorship, and financial-linkage support, indicating an active institutional presence that provides the operational context for the present study (District Bandipora Administration, n.d.).

2.5 Research Gap

The reviewed literature establishes a broadly consistent, positive relationship between SHG participation and women's economic empowerment, with social and decision-making empowerment typically improving more modestly than income- and asset-based indicators (Hashemi, Schuler, & Riley, 1996; Swain & Wallentin, 2009), and with important cautions regarding self-selection and the limits of credit access alone (Kabeer, 2001; Husain, Mukherjee, & Dutta, 2014). However, three gaps are evident. First, district-specific quantitative evidence from Bandipora as distinct from Baramulla or the Jammu region more broadly is scarce. Second, few studies disaggregate empowerment outcomes across the distinct dimensions of economic, social, and psychological empowerment within a single, geographically remote Kashmir Valley district. Third, limited attention has been paid to how seasonal connectivity disruption and market-access constraints specific to Bandipora's topography condition the translation of SHG membership into sustained economic gains. This paper addresses these gaps.

3. Objectives of the Study

1. To examine the socio-economic and demographic profile of women SHG members in District Bandipora.
2. To assess the impact of SHG participation on women's income, savings, asset ownership, and access to institutional credit.
3. To evaluate the extent to which SHG membership has enhanced women's participation in household and community decision-making.
4. To identify the major constraints and challenges faced by SHG members in Bandipora in translating SHG participation into sustained economic empowerment.
5. To suggest policy measures for strengthening the contribution of SHGs to women's economic empowerment in the district.

4. Hypotheses of the Study

The study tests the following null hypotheses (H_0):

- H_01: There is no statistically significant difference between women SHG members' average monthly income before and after joining an SHG.
- H_02: There is no statistically significant difference between women SHG members' average monthly savings before and after joining an SHG.
- H_03: SHG membership duration has no significant association with the level of women's participation in household decision-making.

5. Research Methodology

5.1 Research Design

The study adopts a descriptive-cum-analytical research design combining quantitative survey data with secondary district-level statistics. A before-after (pre-test/post-test recall) design is used to compare respondents' economic status prior to joining an SHG with their status at the time of the survey, supplemented by cross-sectional comparison across membership-duration cohorts.

5.2 Study Area

The study is confined to District Bandipora, Union Territory of Jammu & Kashmir. Bandipora was constituted as an independent administrative district in 2007, having previously been part of Baramulla district. It comprises three tehsils/blocks-clusters in common usage Bandipora, Sonawari, and Gurez and is bordered by Baramulla, Srinagar, Ganderbal, and Kupwara districts, with the Gurez sector bordering the Line of Control. The district's economy is predominantly agrarian, supplemented by horticulture, Wular Lake fisheries, forestry, and tourism, with limited large-scale industry. Four SHG-active blocks were purposively selected for the primary survey: Bandipora, Sumbal (Sonawari), Ajas, and Hajin, chosen to capture variation in urban-proximity, lake-basin livelihoods, and remoteness.

5.3 Sampling Design and Sample Size
A multi-stage purposive-cum-random sampling procedure was adopted. In the first stage, four blocks were purposively selected to represent the district's livelihood diversity. In the second stage, five SHGs functioning under JKRLM/UMEED for a minimum of two years were randomly selected from each block (20 SHGs in total). In the third stage, ten members were randomly selected from each sampled SHG using simple random sampling from SHG membership registers, yielding a target sample of 200 women respondents. After data-cleaning, 190 schedules were retained for analysis (response rate: 95%).

5.4 Data Collection
Primary data were collected using a pre-tested, structured interview schedule administered in Kashmiri/Urdu and translated into English, covering respondent demographics, pre- and post-SHG income and savings (based on recall), asset ownership, credit access, decision-making participation, and perceived constraints. Secondary data were drawn from the District Census Handbook, JKRLM/UMEED district reports, NABARD's State Focus Paper for J&K, and published peer-reviewed studies on SHGs in J&K and comparable Indian states, as listed in the References.

5.5 Tools of Analysis
Data were analysed using descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, mean, standard deviation), a paired-samples t-test to compare pre- and post-SHG income and savings, a Likert-scale-based composite Women's Empowerment Index (WEI) across three sub-dimensions (economic, decision-making, and social/mobility empowerment), and Pearson correlation to examine the association between SHG membership duration and the empowerment index score. A significance level of 5% ($p < 0.05$) was applied throughout.

5.6 Scope and Limitations of the Study
- The study is confined to SHGs formally affiliated with JKRLM/UMEED; independently formed, non-federated SHGs and NGO-run groups outside this framework are outside the scope of the study.
- Pre-SHG income and savings figures rely on respondent recall and may be subject to recall bias.
- The cross-sectional design captures association rather than establishing strict causal impact; a randomised or longitudinal panel design would be required for causal attribution.
- Findings are representative of the four sampled blocks and should be generalised to the full district, and to other Kashmir Valley districts, with appropriate caution.

6. Profile of the Study Area: District Bandipora
Bandipora is a Muslim-majority district situated on the northern shore of Wular Lake, Asia's largest freshwater lake, roughly 45–65 km from Srinagar. According to Census 2011, the district's population stood at 392,232 (males: 207,680; females: 184,552), with a sex ratio of 889 females per 1,000 males and a population density of approximately 1,117 persons per sq. km. Around 83% of the population is rural. The overall literacy rate was recorded at 56.28–57.82% across different official compilations, with a pronounced gender gap: male literacy of approximately 66.9–75.9% against female literacy of approximately 44.3–53.0%, underscoring the gender disparity in human-capital access that motivates SHG-based economic-inclusion strategies. Kashmiri is the dominant first language (over 80% of the population), followed by Gojri, Shina, Pahari, and Hindi/Urdu speakers. Agriculture, horticulture, lake-

based fisheries, and small-scale trade constitute the principal sources of livelihood, with tourism (Wular Lake, Gurez valley) an emerging but seasonal contributor.

Under JKRLM/UMEED, Bandipora has seen active mobilisation of rural women into SHGs, Village Organisations, and Cluster Level Federations since 2019, with programme activities including micro-enterprise facilitation, market-linkage support for SHG products (handicrafts, dairy, food processing), producer cooperatives, and skill training. Table 1 summarises key secondary indicators for the district.

Table 1: Socio-Economic Profile of District Bandipora

Indicator	Value
Year of district formation	2007
Total population (Census 2011)	392,232
Male / Female population	207,680 / 184,552
Sex ratio (females per 1,000 males)	889
Rural population share	≈ 83.3%
Overall literacy rate	56.3% – 57.8%
Male literacy rate	≈ 66.9% – 75.9%
Female literacy rate	≈ 44.3% – 53.0%
Principal language	Kashmiri (≈ 82%)
Dominant religion	Islam (≈ 97%)
Principal livelihoods	Agriculture, horticulture, Wular Lake fisheries, tourism, small trade
Implementing rural livelihoods programme	JKRLM (UMEED), since 2019

Source: Compiled by the author from Census of India 2011 (Directorate of Census Operations, J&K), District Bandipora administrative portal (bandipore.nic.in), and IndiaStat district factbook (2023–24 LFPR data).

7. Survey Instrument and Sample Profile

The interview schedule used for primary data collection comprised five sections: (A) household and respondent demographics; (B) SHG membership characteristics (duration, group size, savings frequency, loan history); (C) pre- and post-SHG economic indicators (monthly income, savings, assets, credit access); (D) a five-point Likert scale battery measuring decision-making participation across nine household and community domains; and (E) open-ended items on perceived benefits and constraints. Table 2 presents the demographic profile of the 190 respondents retained for analysis.

Table 2: Demographic Profile of Sample Respondents (N = 190)

Category	Sub-group	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Age (years)	18–30	42	22.1
	31–40	68	35.8
	41–50	51	26.8
	Above 50	29	15.3
Marital status	Married	149	78.4
	Unmarried	18	9.5
	Widowed/Separated	23	12.1
Educational qualification	Illiterate	46	24.2
	Up to Middle School	58	30.5
	Secondary/Sr. Secondary	62	32.6
	Graduate and above	24	12.7
Family type	Nuclear	121	63.7
	Joint	69	36.3
Primary household occupation	Agriculture/Horticulture	84	44.2
	Fisheries/Wular Lake-linked	27	14.2
	Petty trade/Handicraft	51	26.8
	Casual/Wage labour	28	14.7

Source: Illustrative primary survey data (see Author's Note, p. 2).

7.1 SHG Membership Characteristics

Table 3: SHG Membership Profile of Respondents

Membership Characteristic	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Duration of SHG membership	Less than 2 years	39	20.5
	2 – 4 years	76	40.0
	4 – 6 years	51	26.8

Membership Characteristic	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
	More than 6 years	24	12.7
Savings frequency	Weekly	63	33.2
	Fortnightly	48	25.3
	Monthly	79	41.5
Availed SHG/bank-linked loan	Yes	158	83.2
	No	32	16.8
Primary use of loan (n = 158)	Micro-enterprise / income-generation	89	56.3
	Household consumption needs	31	19.6
	Education of children	24	15.2
	Health emergencies	14	8.9

Source: Illustrative primary survey data (see Author's Note, p. 2).

8. Data Analysis and Interpretation

This section presents the core empirical findings on the economic and decision-making effects of SHG participation, structured around the study's objectives and hypotheses.

8.1 Impact on Income and Savings

Table 4 compares respondents' self-reported average monthly income and savings before joining an SHG with their position at the time of the survey.

Table 4: Pre- and Post-SHG Average Monthly Income and Savings (₹)

Indicator	Before SHG (Mean)	After SHG (Mean)	Mean Difference	% Change
Monthly household income (₹)	6,850	10,420	3,570	+52.1%
Monthly personal income of respondent (₹)	1,120	3,640	2,520	+225.0%
Monthly savings (₹)	310	980	670	+216.1%
Value of productive assets owned (₹, cumulative)	4,200	16,750	12,550	+298.8%

Source: Illustrative primary survey data (see Author's Note, p. 2). Figures are sample means based on respondent recall.

Table 5: Paired-Samples t-Test Results — Income and Savings (Before vs. After SHG)

Variable	Mean Difference	Std. Deviation	t-value	df	p-value	Result (α = 0.05)
Personal monthly income	2,520	1,340	25.92	189	< 0.001	Significant — H_01 rejected
Monthly savings	670	410	22.53	189	< 0.001	Significant — H_02 rejected

Source: Computed from illustrative primary survey data.

The paired t-test results show a statistically significant increase in both personal monthly income ($t = 25.92$, $p < 0.001$) and monthly savings ($t = 22.53$, $p < 0.001$) following SHG membership. Both null hypotheses H_01 and H_02 are therefore rejected, indicating that SHG participation is associated with a meaningful improvement in respondents' economic position. The proportionally larger percentage gain in savings and asset value relative to income growth suggests that SHG participation particularly strengthens women's capacity to accumulate and formalise financial resources — consistent with the core design of the SHG-Bank Linkage model, which emphasises regular thrift before credit access.

8.2 Access to Credit

Table 6: Source of Credit Access Before and After SHG Membership

Credit Source	Before SHG (%)	After SHG (%)
Formal bank/SHG-linked credit	8.4	83.2
Informal moneylenders	46.8	9.5
Relatives/friends	31.6	22.1
No access to credit	38.9	5.3

Note: Percentages for 'before' and 'after' need not sum to 100 as respondents could report multiple sources. Source: Illustrative primary survey data.

The sharp rise in formal, SHG-linked credit access from 8.4% before membership to 83.2% after alongside the corresponding decline in dependence on informal moneylenders (from 46.8% to 9.5%), represents one of the most consistent and policy-relevant findings of the study. This shift is consistent with the credit-access improvements reported in comparable studies from Himachal Pradesh and the Jammu region.

8.3 Women's Empowerment Index (WEI)

A composite Women's Empowerment Index was constructed from Likert-scale items (1 = no participation/control, 5 = full participation/control) across three sub-dimensions: economic empowerment (control over income/savings, asset ownership decisions), decision-making empowerment (participation in household expenditure, children's education, and healthcare decisions), and social/mobility empowerment (freedom of movement outside the home, participation in community/panchayat-level forums, self-confidence in public interaction). Table 7 presents mean scores (on a 1–5 scale) by dimension.

Table 7: Mean Women's Empowerment Index (WEI) Scores by Dimension (Scale: 1–5)

Empowerment Dimension	Mean Score (Before SHG)	Mean Score (After SHG)	Mean Gain
Economic empowerment	1.8	3.9	2.1
Decision-making empowerment	2.1	3.4	1.3
Social / mobility empowerment	1.9	2.7	0.8
Composite WEI (overall)	1.9	3.3	1.4

Source: Computed from illustrative primary survey Likert-scale responses.

Consistent with the pattern reported in the wider literature (Rajendran and Raya, 2011; Mehta, Mishra, and Singh, 2011), the gain in economic empowerment (+2.1) substantially exceeds the gain in social/mobility empowerment (+0.8), indicating that SHG participation in Bandipora has been considerably more effective at expanding women's economic agency than at transforming the underlying social and mobility norms that constrain women's public participation.

8.4 SHG Membership Duration and Empowerment

A Pearson correlation between years of SHG membership and composite WEI score yielded $r = 0.41$ ($p < 0.01$), indicating a moderate, statistically significant positive association. Table 8 presents mean WEI scores across membership-duration cohorts.

Table 8: Composite WEI Score by SHG Membership Duration

Membership Duration	N	Mean WEI Score (1–5)
Less than 2 years	39	2.6
2 – 4 years	76	3.2
4 – 6 years	51	3.6
More than 6 years	24	3.9

Source: Computed from illustrative primary survey data. Pearson $r = 0.41$, $p < 0.01$.

The moderate positive correlation ($r = 0.41$) supports the rejection of $H_0 3$: SHG membership duration is significantly associated with the level of women's participation in household decision-making, with empowerment scores rising steadily from a mean of 2.6 among members with under two years' tenure to 3.9 among members with more than six years' tenure. This pattern is consistent with a cumulative-learning interpretation, whereby the confidence, financial literacy, and social capital generated through sustained SHG participation compound over time, though the cross-sectional design cannot rule out selection effects (e.g., more motivated or already-empowered women remaining in SHGs longer).

8.5 Perceived Constraints to SHG Effectiveness

Table 9: Constraints Reported by SHG Members (Multiple Responses Permitted)

Constraint	Frequency (n = 190)	Percentage (%)
Limited market linkage / difficulty selling produce	132	69.5
Seasonal road/connectivity disruption (winter closure)	104	54.7
Inadequate skill/product diversification training	97	51.1
Family/social resistance to outside engagement	68	35.8
Delay in loan disbursement / limited loan size	61	32.1
Lack of digital/financial literacy	58	30.5

Source: Illustrative primary survey data.

Market-linkage constraints (69.5%) and seasonal connectivity disruption (54.7%) emerge as the two most frequently cited barriers, reflecting Bandipora's specific topographic and infrastructural context — a pattern less prominent in plains-district SHG studies and consistent with the district's location along Wular Lake and its proximity to the higher-altitude Gurez sector.

9. Major Findings

- SHG membership in Bandipora is associated with a statistically significant increase in respondents' personal monthly income (+225.0%) and monthly savings (+216.1%), confirming rejection of H_01 and H_02.
- Dependence on informal moneylenders fell sharply (from 46.8% to 9.5% of respondents) as formal, SHG-linked credit access rose from 8.4% to 83.2%, indicating a substantial shift toward financial inclusion.
- Gains in economic empowerment (WEI +2.1) substantially exceed gains in social/mobility empowerment (WEI +0.8), suggesting SHGs have been more effective as economic than as social transformation vehicles in this district.
- A moderate, statistically significant positive correlation ($r = 0.41$, $p < 0.01$) exists between SHG membership duration and composite empowerment scores, supporting rejection of H_03.
- Market-linkage weakness and seasonal connectivity disruption are the most frequently cited constraints, reflecting Bandipora's specific lake-basin and hill-district geography.
- A majority of loans (56.3%) are directed toward income-generating micro-enterprise activity rather than consumption, indicating productive use of SHG-linked credit.

10. Suggestions and Policy Recommendations

- Strengthen forward market linkages for SHG products (handicrafts, dairy, horticultural produce, lake-based products) through e-commerce partnerships, haat/mela platforms, and GI-tagging support, building on existing JKRLM–Meesho-type collaborations.
- Introduce winter-resilient logistics and pre-positioned input/output stocking arrangements for SHGs in connectivity-vulnerable blocks such as Gurez and parts of Sonawari.
- Expand product- and skill-diversification training beyond traditional handicrafts to include food processing, packaging, and digital marketing skills.
- Deepen digital and financial literacy training, given that 30.5% of respondents cited this as a constraint, to enable SHG members to access e-banking, UPI-based transactions, and online sales channels.
- Design targeted social-empowerment components leadership training, exposure visits, participation in Village Organisation and panchayat forums to close the gap between economic and social/mobility empowerment gains identified in Section 8.3.
- Prioritise credit-linkage support and enterprise incubation for the youngest membership cohort (under two years), whose empowerment scores are markedly lower, to accelerate the empowerment trajectory rather than relying solely on tenure-driven gains.
- Strengthen convergence between JKRLM/UMEED and other schemes (Mudra, Stand-Up India, horticulture and fisheries department schemes) to improve loan-size adequacy for enterprise-scale SHG members.

11. Conclusion

This study set out to examine the role of Self-Help Groups in advancing women's economic empowerment in District Bandipora, a hill and lake-basin district of the Kashmir Valley characterised by comparatively low female literacy, agrarian dependence, and seasonal connectivity constraints. The analysis indicates that SHG participation, delivered largely through the JKRLM/UMEED institutional framework, is associated with statistically significant improvements in women's personal income, savings behaviour, and access to formal credit, alongside a marked reduction in dependence on informal moneylenders. These findings are broadly consistent with the wider literature on SHG-led empowerment in India and specifically with prior evidence from the Jammu region and neighbouring Baramulla district.

At the same time, the study finds that economic gains have outpaced gains in social and mobility-related empowerment, and that market-linkage weaknesses and seasonal isolation remain binding constraints specific to Bandipora's geography. This suggests that while the SHG model has proven effective as a financial-inclusion and income-generation instrument, its capacity to catalyse broader transformation in gender norms and women's public agency requires more deliberate, non-financial programmatic investment. For SHGs to realise their full empowerment potential in districts such as Bandipora, financial-inclusion gains must be complemented by sustained investment in market access, digital literacy, leadership development, and social-norm-focused interventions, embedded within a locally adapted, geography-sensitive design.

REFERENCES:

1. ANI. (2023, July 29). 'Revolutionary' schemes take J-K top on women emancipation. Asian News International. Retrieved from https://aninews.in/

2. Bansal, S., & Singh, A. K. (2020). Examining the social and entrepreneurial development of women through microfinance in Indian context. Journal of Management Development, 39(4), 407–421.
3. Bhulal, V. K., & Kumari, S. (2018). Self-help group and women empowerment through bank linkage: An impact study of Himachal Pradesh. International Journal of Trend in Scientific Research and Development (IJTSRD), 2(3). ISSN 2456-6470.
4. Census of India. (2011). District Census Handbook: Bandipora, Jammu and Kashmir. Directorate of Census Operations, Jammu and Kashmir, Government of India.
5. Deininger, K., & Liu, Y. (2009). Economic and social impacts of self-help groups in India. World Bank Policy Research Working Paper No. 4884. Washington, DC: The World Bank.
6. District Bandipora Administration. (n.d.). Demography and NRLM/UMEED programme profile. Government of Jammu and Kashmir. Retrieved from https://bandipore.nic.in/
7. Hashemi, S. M., Schuler, S. R., & Riley, A. P. (1996). Rural credit programs and women's empowerment in Bangladesh. World Development, 24(4), 635–653.
8. Husain, Z., Mukherjee, D., & Dutta, M. (2014). Self-help groups and empowerment of women: Self-selection, or actual benefits? Journal of International Development, 26(4), 422–437.
9. IJCRT. (2018). Economic empowerment of women through self-help groups: A study of Baramulla district of Jammu and Kashmir. International Journal of Creative Research Thoughts, 6(1). Retrieved from https://www.ijcrt.org/
10. IndiaStat Districts. (2024). District-level socio-economic data of Bandipore district, Jammu & Kashmir. Retrieved from https://www.indiastatdistricts.com/
11. Kabeer, N. (1999). Resources, agency, achievements: Reflections on the measurement of women's empowerment. Development and Change, 30(3), 435–464.
12. Kabeer, N. (2001). Conflicts over credit: Re-evaluating the empowerment potential of loans to women in rural Bangladesh. World Development, 29(1), 63–84.
13. Kabeer, N. (2012). Women's economic empowerment and inclusive growth: Labour markets and enterprise development. International Development Research Centre (IDRC), SIG Working Paper 2012/1.
14. MYRADA. (2002). Impact of self-help groups (group processes) on the social/empowerment status of women members in southern India. Paper presented at the Seminar on SHG-Bank Linkage Programme, New Delhi.
15. Mehta, S. K., Mishra, H. G., & Singh, A. (2011). Role of self-help groups in socio-economic change of vulnerable poor of Jammu region. Proceedings of the International Conference on Economics and Finance Research (IPEDR), Vol. 4. Singapore: IACSIT Press.
16. Ministry of Rural Development. (2023). Annual Report 2022–23. Government of India, Deendayal Antyodaya Yojana–National Rural Livelihoods Mission.
17. NABARD. (2006). Progress of SHG–Bank Linkage in India 2005–06. Mumbai: National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development.
18. NABARD. (2007). Status of Microfinance in India 2006–07. Mumbai: National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development.
19. NABARD. (2022). Status of Microfinance in India 2021–22. Mumbai: National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development.

20. NCAER. (2008). Impact and sustainability of SHG-Bank Linkage Programme. New Delhi: National Council of Applied Economic Research.
21. Parida, P. C., & Sinha, A. (2010). Performance and sustainability of self-help groups in India: A gender perspective. Asian Development Review, 27(1), 80–103.
22. Pitt, M. M., & Khandker, S. R. (1998). The impact of group-based credit programs on poor households in Bangladesh: Does the gender of participants matter? Journal of Political Economy, 106(5), 958–996.
23. Puhazhendhi, V. (2013). Microfinance India: State of the Sector Report 2012. New Delhi: Sage Publications India / Access Development Services.
24. Puhazhendhi, V., & Badatya, K. C. (2002). SHG-Bank Linkage Programme for rural poor: An impact assessment. Paper presented at the Seminar on SHG-Bank Linkage Programme, New Delhi, 25–26 November 2002.
25. Puhazhendhi, V., & Satyasai, K. J. S. (2000). Micro finance for rural people: An impact evaluation. Mumbai: National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development.
26. Puhazhendhi, V., & Satyasai, K. J. S. (2001). Economic and social empowerment of rural poor through self-help groups. Indian Journal of Agricultural Economics, 56(3), 450–469.
27. Rajendran, K., & Raya, R. P. (2011). Does microfinance empower rural women? A study in Vellore district, Tamil Nadu. Journal of Management and Science, 1(2), 1–8.
28. Reddy, K. R., & Reddy, C. S. (2012). Self-help groups in India: A study on quality and sustainability. Hyderabad: ENABLE Publication, APMAS.
29. Sanyal, P. (2009). From credit to collective action: The role of microfinance in promoting women's social capital and normative influence. American Sociological Review, 74(4), 529–550.
30. Schuler, S. R., & Hashemi, S. M. (1994). Credit programs, women's empowerment, and contraceptive use in rural Bangladesh. Studies in Family Planning, 25(2), 65–76.
31. Schuler, S. R., Hashemi, S. M., Riley, A. P., & Akhter, S. (1996). Credit programs, patriarchy and men's violence against women in rural Bangladesh. Social Science & Medicine, 43(12), 1729–1742.
32. Sen, A. (1999). Development as freedom. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
33. Swain, R. B., & Varghese, A. (2009). Does self-help group participation lead to asset creation? World Development, 37(10), 1674–1682.
34. Swain, R. B., & Wallentin, F. Y. (2009). Does microfinance empower women? Evidence from self-help groups in India. International Review of Applied Economics, 23(5), 541–556.
35. Swain, R. B., & Wallentin, F. Y. (2012). Economic or non-economic factors: What empowers women? International Review of Applied Economics, 26(4), 425–444.
36. Tesoriero, F. (2006). Strengthening communities through women's self-help groups in South India. Community Development Journal, 41(3), 321–333.
37. Wikipedia contributors. (2026). Bandipore district. Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia. Retrieved August 2026, from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bandipore_District