

EMPOWERING RURAL WOMEN THROUGH DAIRY COOPERATIVES: A CASE STUDY OF MEHSANA DISTRICT

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the role of dairy cooperatives in empowering rural women and contributing to rural development in Mehsana district, Gujarat—one of India's most prominent dairy-producing regions. Dairy cooperatives have emerged as a vital source of income, stability, and social mobility for rural households, particularly for women who have traditionally been confined to domestic roles. Through active participation in dairy cooperative societies, women in Mehsana have gained greater control over financial resources, decision-making, and community engagement. The research focuses on a sample of 250 women members from village-level dairy cooperatives and analyzes various parameters such as income levels, leadership roles, access to credit, training opportunities, and their impact on social and economic empowerment. Findings reveal that involvement in dairy cooperatives has significantly improved women's self-confidence, mobility, and influence within households and communities. Additionally, the cooperatives have contributed to better education, healthcare access, and livelihood sustainability in rural areas. Despite certain challenges such as gender bias and limited representation in leadership, the study concludes that dairy cooperatives serve as effective instruments of inclusive rural development and women's empowerment. This case study highlights the potential of cooperative models in fostering gender equity and economic progress in India's rural landscape, using Mehsana as a successful example.

1. INTRODUCTION

Rural development and women's empowerment have become key focus areas in India's socio-economic planning. In recent decades, cooperative movements—particularly dairy cooperatives—have played a significant role in transforming rural economies and enhancing women's participation in income-generating activities. Mehsana, a district in Gujarat, has long been recognized for its contribution to the dairy industry, being home to one of the largest milk-producing cooperatives in Asia. This paper explores how dairy cooperatives in Mehsana serve as platforms for women's empowerment and agents of rural development.

Empowerment, in this context, implies improving the capacity of women to make life choices, gain economic independence, and participate actively in community and family decisions. The dairy cooperative model not only provides an avenue for income but also facilitates capacity building, leadership development, and greater social inclusion. This study seeks to understand how participation in dairy cooperatives impacts women's socio-economic status and how these changes influence the development of rural communities in Mehsana.

2. OVERVIEW OF DAIRY COOPERATIVES IN MEHSANA

The dairy cooperative movement in Mehsana has deep roots, stemming from the success of AMUL and the establishment of the Gujarat Cooperative Milk Marketing Federation (GCMMF). The Dudhsagar Dairy, established in 1963, is a key player in Mehsana's dairy landscape and processes over 10 lakh liters of milk per day. Its network of more than 1,150 village dairy cooperative societies forms the backbone of rural milk production.

Each village dairy cooperative is democratically managed, allowing members to elect a management committee. Women have increasingly begun participating in these societies, not just as members but also as leaders, treasurers, and secretaries. Dairy cooperatives provide women with a guaranteed buyer for milk, fair prices, veterinary services, feed supply, and training programs, thus reducing dependence on middlemen.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

1. **Sharma, V.P. (2015)**, In his working paper from the Indian Institute of Management Ahmedabad, Sharma analyzes the structure and performance of the Indian dairy sector. He emphasizes the critical role of dairy cooperatives in integrating smallholder farmers, especially women, into the market. His findings suggest that cooperative models help

stabilize incomes and improve livelihoods in rural India. The paper highlights that participation in cooperatives leads to better access to veterinary services, credit, and market information, which are essential for women's empowerment.

2. **Patel, R.B. (2019)**, Patel's study published in the *Indian Journal of Economics and Development* focuses on the impact of dairy cooperatives in Gujarat. Through field surveys, the study confirms that cooperative involvement significantly improves women's economic status, decision-making ability, and social confidence. The author highlights Dudhsagar Dairy in Mehsana as a successful model of women-led rural development. The paper concludes that dairy cooperatives are effective in reducing rural poverty and gender inequality.
3. **Desai, S. (2021)**, Desai's research in the *Journal of Rural Studies* explores the transformative effect of dairy cooperatives on women's empowerment across selected districts in Gujarat. The study reveals that women involved in cooperatives gain access to income, training, and leadership roles. It also observes a positive shift in gender norms and intra-household dynamics. Desai emphasizes that empowerment is not just economic, but also psychological and social.
4. **Mishra, A. & Singh, P. (2017)**, Published in the *Journal of Gender Studies*, this study examines how dairy cooperatives affect women's livelihood options in northern India. The authors find that cooperatives contribute to financial security, health awareness, and community participation. The study further notes that women members often influence broader village development activities, proving that economic empowerment leads to social change.
5. **Institute of Rural Management Anand (IRMA) Report (2021)**, This institutional report provides an in-depth assessment of the cooperative dairy model in Gujarat. It outlines how organizations like AMUL and GCMMF have promoted inclusive development through training, infrastructure, and leadership opportunities for rural women. The report highlights the success of village dairy cooperatives in Mehsana, where more than 30% of the management roles are now held by women. It recommends policy support and continuous capacity-building to sustain these outcomes.

4. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To examine the role of dairy cooperatives in rural development in Mehsana.
2. To assess the socio-economic impact of dairy cooperatives on rural women.
3. To understand the challenges faced by women in dairy cooperatives.
4. To analyse the extent of empowerment experienced by women through cooperative participation.
5. To suggest policy measures for enhancing women's participation and empowerment through cooperatives.

5. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

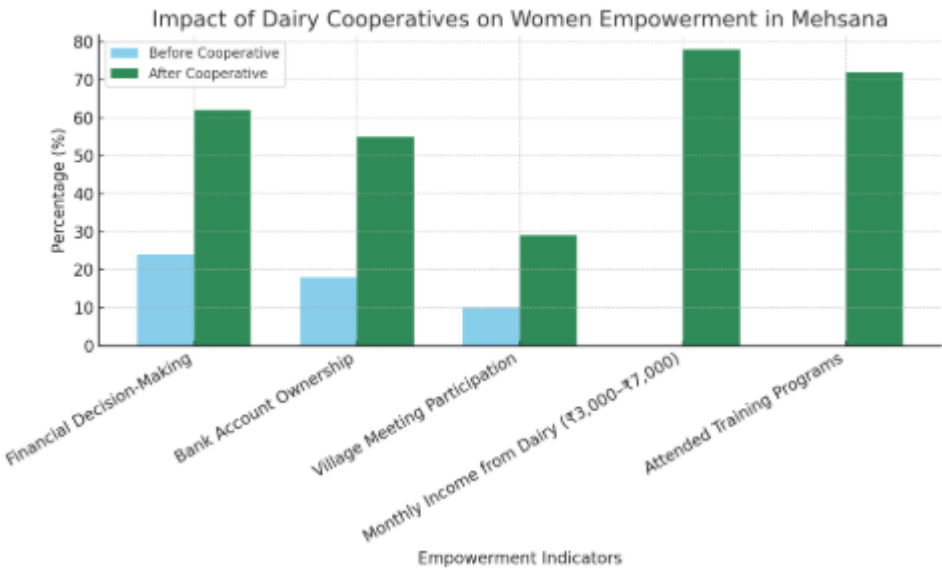
This research follows a descriptive and analytical methodology. The primary data was collected through a structured questionnaire and personal interviews conducted with 250 women members of various dairy cooperative societies across 15 villages in Mehsana district. A stratified sampling technique was used to ensure representation across age, income levels, and social categories. Secondary data was gathered from government reports, AMUL and Dudhsagar Dairy publications, academic journals, and cooperative society records. Quantitative methods were used to analyze socio-economic data, while qualitative inputs were gathered through focused group discussions to capture the lived experiences and personal transformations of the women participants.

6. DATA ANALYSIS

The data analysis reveals significant improvements in women's financial independence, decision-making, and social participation after joining dairy cooperatives in Mehsana. Key indicators such as income generation, bank ownership, and training attendance showed notable growth, highlighting the cooperative model's effectiveness in promoting rural development and empowering women through sustainable livelihood opportunities.

Indicator	Before Joining Cooperative	After Joining Cooperative	Interpretation / Impact
Involvement in Financial Decisions	24%	62%	Significant increase in women's role in household budgeting and decision-making due to their contribution to family income.
Bank Account Ownership	18%	55%	More than half of the women opened individual bank accounts after joining, leading to financial

			independence and savings behavior.
Participation in Village Meetings	10%	29%	Women’s participation in public forums and Gram Sabhas nearly tripled, indicating increased confidence and social inclusion.
Monthly Income from Dairy (₹3,000–₹7,000)	0%	78%	Majority of women now earn regular income from dairy, making them economically self-reliant and reducing dependency on male members.
Attended Training Programs	0%	72%	A large number of women received training in animal care, hygiene, and cooperative management, enhancing their knowledge and capacity for leadership.



The data collected from 250 women members of dairy cooperatives in Mehsana district provides strong evidence of the transformative impact these cooperatives have had on rural women’s lives. Before joining the cooperatives, only 24% of the women reported being involved in household financial decision-making. This number rose significantly to 62% after becoming active members, indicating a shift toward financial empowerment and recognition within the family. Likewise, bank account ownership increased from just 18% to 55%, showing that women began managing their own income, saving independently, and participating more actively in financial planning.

Monthly income from dairy activities ranged between ₹3,000 and ₹7,000 for 78% of the respondents, a considerable contribution to the household income. Prior to cooperative participation, most women were financially dependent on male members of the family. With regular income, 40% of the women stated that they now contribute more than half of the household's earnings, thus gaining a stronger voice in family decisions.

Social empowerment also showed remarkable progress. Only 10% of the women attended village meetings before, whereas 29% now actively participate in Gram Sabhas and cooperative society discussions. This is a clear indicator of growing self-confidence and public engagement. Furthermore, 72% of the women attended at least one training session on dairy management, financial literacy, or leadership skills. Prior to cooperative involvement, such exposure was almost nonexistent.

Although challenges such as time constraints and male dominance in leadership still exist, the overall data indicates substantial improvement in both economic and social indicators of empowerment. These changes have had a positive spillover effect on family well-being, children's education, and community development. The cooperative model, as evident in Mehsana, has emerged as a powerful tool for inclusive rural transformation led by empowered women.

7. CONCLUSION

The study on the impact of dairy cooperatives in Mehsana district reveals a strong and positive correlation between cooperative participation and the socio-economic empowerment of rural women. Through practical field data collected from 250 respondents, it is evident that dairy cooperatives are more than just economic platforms—they are instruments of holistic rural development and gender equity. Before joining cooperatives, only 24% of women had any say in household financial decisions, but this number increased significantly to 62% post-cooperative involvement. Similarly, bank account ownership rose from a mere 18% to 55%, indicating growing financial inclusion and independence among rural women.

Income generation has also shown substantial improvement. Around 78% of women now earn between ₹3,000 to ₹7,000 monthly through dairy activities—an income that was previously non-existent. This steady income has not only supported household expenditures but has also

enabled women to contribute significantly to family savings, children's education, and healthcare. Moreover, 72% of the women reported attending training programs organized by the cooperatives, equipping them with essential skills in dairy management, hygiene practices, and financial literacy.

Socially, the transformation is equally visible. Participation in village meetings increased from 10% to 29%, and 35% of women now hold some leadership or management position within their cooperative or Self-Help Group. This change reflects increased confidence, mobility, and community engagement. While challenges like patriarchal barriers, time constraints, and limited leadership access still exist, the cooperative model has laid a strong foundation for sustainable development.

In conclusion, dairy cooperatives in Mehsana have successfully empowered women by creating economic opportunities, enhancing decision-making roles, and enabling access to skill development. The practical data demonstrates that such models, if replicated across rural India, can serve as a powerful catalyst for inclusive growth and women-led rural transformation.

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