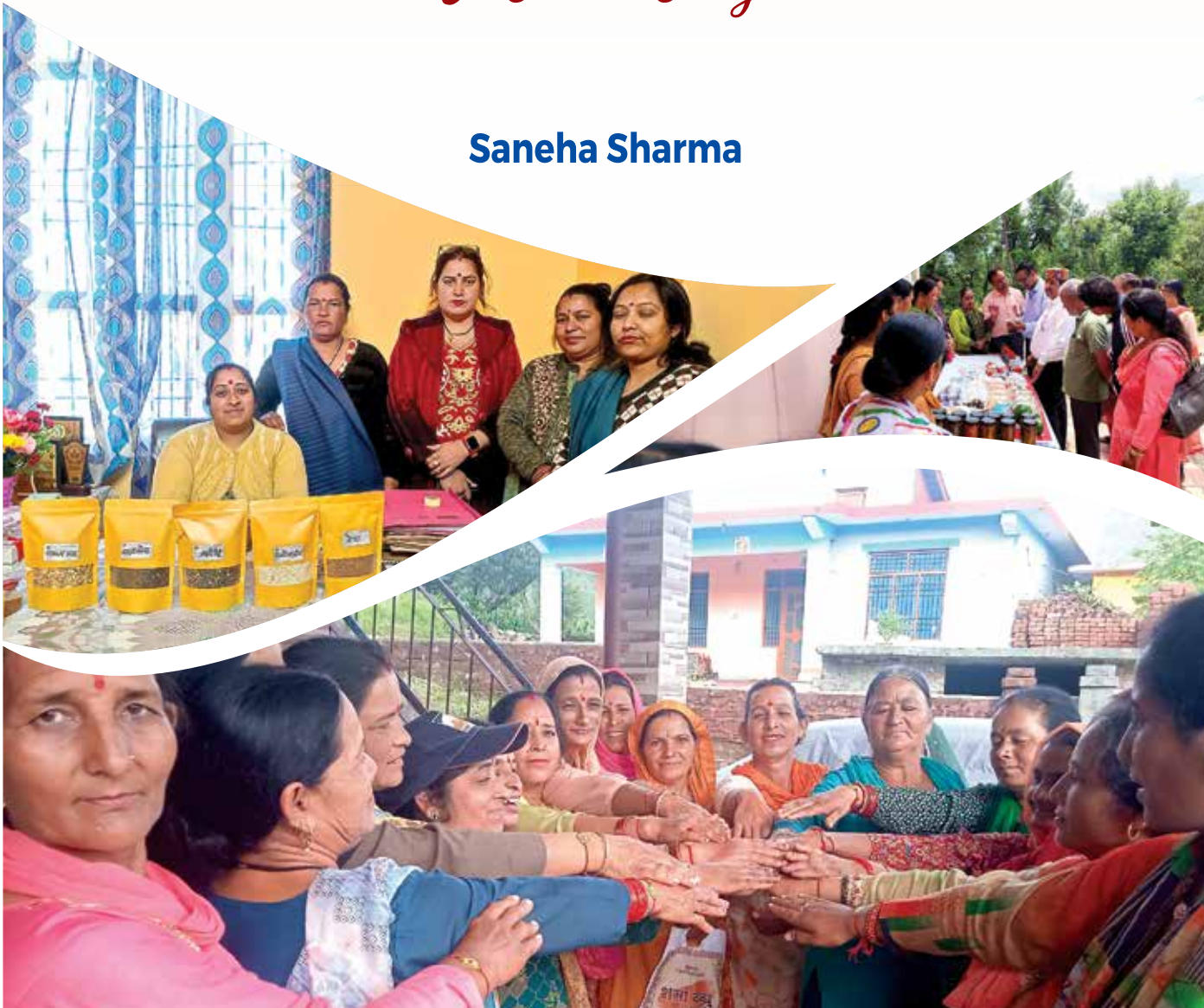




# A Woman Entrepreneur's Journey from Adversity to Prosperity

*A Success Story*

**Saneha Sharma**





## Trust for Advancement of Agricultural Sciences (TAAS)

### GOAL

Harnessing the potential of agricultural sciences for the welfare of the people.

### MISSION

Promoting growth and advancement of agriculture through scientific partnerships, policy advocacy and public awareness.

### OBJECTIVES

- To act as a 'Think Tank' to deliberate on key issues relating to agricultural research and innovation for development (ARI4D) and influence policy decisions
- To organize workshops, conferences, brainstorming sessions, policy dialogues seminars and special lectures on emerging issues and new developments in agricultural sciences
- To disseminate knowledge among stakeholders through publication of proceedings, strategy papers and policy briefs
- To recognize and award the scientists of Indian and foreign origin for their outstanding contributions towards Indian agriculture
- To facilitate scientific interactions and partnership building of non-resident Indian agricultural scientists with Indian scientists

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**Saneha Sharma**



**Trust for Advancement of Agricultural Sciences (TAAS)**

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# Foreword

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This success story of Ms Saneha Sharma transcends the realm of personal achievements, delving into the potential of a rural woman whose life embodies the power of unwavering resolve, deep sense of purpose, and an unyielding passion.

Born in a small village, the heart of rural India, in Mandi district of Himachal Pradesh, where opportunity often seems scarce and challenges abound, Ms Saneha's journey began like many other women – with aspirations that seemed quite distant. But it is not the obstacles she faced that mark her story, but the unwavering resolve with which she confronted them to become a successful entrepreneur and a beacon of hope for her community.

While reading through this publication, you will witness a remarkable success of a simple village girl transforming herself into an entrepreneur. Ms Saneha's story is far more than a personal success; being a captivating story of a positive transformation of a rural woman. Through her innovative work in agriculture around integrated farming systems, skill development through *Krishi Vigyan Kendra* (KVK), Mandi, relating to microfinance concept, and women's empowerment, Ms Saneha shows the way to success for other women and self-help groups.

This success story calls for action, urging to re-evaluate our perceptions of rural development, women's empowerment, and the untapped potential that exists within every corner of society. Saneha's story sheds light that supportive ecosystem, government initiatives, KVK and NGO interventions play crucial role in fostering individual successes. It serves as a message for policymakers, development practitioners and individuals alike, recognising the very potential that each dreamer can realise with hard work, determination and perseverance. Through Ms Saneha's story, we are reminded that education, skill development, and entrepreneurship are not simple pathways to personal success, but are the powerful tools for societal transformation. In the process, no doubt role of local

institutions like KVKs must be recognised for knowledge sharing, skill development, institutional backstopping, mentorship and hand-holding approach.

I congratulate Ms Saneha Sharma for providing all the relevant information relating to her experiences on integrated farming system, which Trust of Advancement of Agricultural Sciences (TAAS) is pleased to publish as a success story entitled: **“A Woman Entrepreneur’s Journey from Adversity to Prosperity: A Success Story”**. I am sure, this publication would enlighten the policymakers, scientists, extension personnel, entrepreneurs and other smallholder farmers.

  
Raj Paroda



# Preface

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**M**s Saneha Sharma, a testament to the indomitable woman spirit, was born in a small village in district Mandi of Himachal Pradesh. The challenges that would have deterred many, yet not only persevered determined Saneha but helped her transform the adversity into opportunity. Her story is not merely a chronicle of personal triumph but a beacon of hope for countless others who grapple with similar hurdles in their pursuit of a better life. This success story delves into the successful life of Ms Saneha Sharma, carving her path from a young girl with limited resources to a woman of remarkable success and achievements. It is a narrative of courage, determination, and the power of women's potential in the face of societal and economic constraints. Through her story, we hope to inspire the younger generation to overcome their own obstacles recognizing their personal strength to achieve enhanced income and improved livelihoods.

Ms Saneha started her life's journey in a small village where access to education and opportunities were scarce. Despite these limitations, she exhibited an early passion for learning and a drive to improve her livelihood. Her path was full of challenges – from financial hardships to gender-based discrimination – yet she continued on her path with courage and dedication. Ms Saneha's story reveals her transformation from a shy village girl to a confident entrepreneur and community leader, and encompasses not only personal growth but also her efforts to uplift others in her ecosystem. Through innovative agricultural practices, microfinance initiatives, and women's empowerment programs, Ms Saneha has become a catalyst for change in her community. This narrative also sheds light on the crucial role of supportive ecosystems in fostering success. It highlights how government schemes, *Krishi Vigyan Kendras* (KVKs) interventions, and community support can create an enabling environment for progressive individuals like Ms Saneha. Her journey underscores the potential of rural women as agents of change and the transformative power of education, skill development, and entrepreneurship in rural economies.

As you embark on this journey with Ms Saneha, you will be inspired by her resilience in the face of challenges, and her unwavering spirit and commitment to make a difference. Her story is an example of how individual success can catalyze community development and contribute to broader societal progress. Through Ms Saneha's experiences, we aim to ignite a spark of hope and determination in young entrepreneurs aspiring for better livelihood through sustainable agriculture. Her story will certainly motivate and empower other rural women to overcome their own barriers, pursue their dreams relentlessly, and strive hard to use their untapped potential for a better future – not just for themselves, but for their communities and beyond.

**Editors**

# Abbreviations and Acronyms

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ATMA	Agricultural Technology Management Agency
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
FPO	Farmer Producer organization
ICAR-NBPGR	Indian Council of Agricultural Research - National Bureau of Plant Genetic Resources
IFS	Integrated Farming System
IGNOU	Indira Gandhi National Open University
ISPGR	Indian Society of Plant Genetic Resources
ITI	Industrial Training Institute
KVK	Krishi Vigyan Kendra
MKSP	Mahila Kisan Sashaktikaran Pariyojana
MSMEs	Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises
NGO	Non-Government Organization
NRLM	National Rural Livelihoods Mission
NSSO	National Sample Survey Office
PBFSNWH	Plant Biodiversity for Food, Nutrition and Health Security in North-West Himalayas
q	Quintal
RIO	Return on Investment
₹	Indian Rupee

SHG	Self-help Group
TAAS	Trust for Advancement of Agricultural Sciences
ZBNF	Zero Budget Natural Farming



# A Woman Entrepreneur's Journey from Adversity to Prosperity

## *A Success Story*

### Introduction

Ms Sanaha Sharma through her sheer grit and determination changed her destiny. Her family annual income was only ₹ 65,000, she had just passed 12th and married at the age of 20 years. But now with adoption of Integrated Farming Model as per directions of KVK Mandi, her annual income increased to ₹ 5,10,000. She has changed not only her life but of many women farmers of her region. Her story is an eye opener for millions of young smallholder farmers who want to do farming and live a respectable and worthy life.

Small and marginal farmers make the backbone of agriculture in India as over 86 per cent are cultivating less than 2 ha. Notably, women make-up the majority of these smallholders, with 84 per cent relying on agriculture for their livelihood. Despite their critical role for centuries in ensuring food security, women have often been under-recognized. According to a report by National Sample Survey Office (NSSO), 46 per cent of the agricultural workforce is female, only 13 per cent of rural women are entrepreneurs in this sector. While data is limited, many rural women entrepreneurs are involved in agriculture-related businesses like farming, processing, and handicrafts. Empowering them requires knowledge and skill development based on local needs. This includes

reducing drudgery through improved technology and fostering entrepreneurial opportunities. Limited awareness of these opportunities and lack of training are key barriers. The additional burden of household chores further strains their time and energy.

Recognizing this, the Indian government has launched programs like *Mahila Kisan Sashaktikaran Pariyojana* (MKSP) and National Rural Livelihoods Mission (NRLM) to provide training, financial support, and market access. Additionally, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and private sector organizations/institutions through various initiatives are working towards empowering women in agriculture and promoting their entrepreneurial spirit. Ultimately, empowering women farmers, especially the landless and poor, is a significant step in reforming Indian agriculture. As the value of women's contributions to agriculture is increasingly recognized, more women are taking leadership roles. These leaders champion sustainable practices, advocate for gender equality, and empower other women farmers. Ms Saneha Sharma, a smallholder farmer from a remote village Taraur in district Mandi of Himachal Pradesh, exemplifies this movement.

An inspirational agri-entrepreneur and innovator, Ms Sharma embraces new agricultural ideas and technologies. Her sustainable practices have brought both environmental and long-term economic benefits to her community. By promoting integrated farming system, she has fostered resilience against climate change and ecological sustainability. This, in turn, has empowered the women in her community, making them self-reliant and financially independent. Her success story highlights the strong connection between sustainable agriculture and financial empowerment.

## **Laying the Foundation**

After completing her intermediate (12<sup>th</sup> standard), Ms Sharma was married at the age of 20 years in 2007. She was interested in continuing her studies and got full support from her husband and in-laws in this endeavour. She completed a computer course from Industrial Training Institute (ITI) in 2009-10, graduation from Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) in 2011, and Fashion Designing course from N Shine Boutique in 2013. She also studied one-year short course on dress-designing from ITI, Mandi. She started her own boutique in 2015, and trained/motivated about 300 women to start their own entrepreneurship in cutting and tailoring to sustain their livelihood. She was initially interested in

fashion designing, but farming made a special place in her life because she got tremendous support from *Krishi Vigyan Kendra* (KVK), Mandi. Ms Saneha wanted to find a better way to fulfil her pressing family needs as traditional farming and small-scale dairy activities were not that remunerative.

Ms Saneha was cultivating subsistence crops like wheat, maize in a traditional way but was not able to make much profits or save money due to high farm input costs. Her farm income was very limited due to lack of knowledge and skill about improved agricultural technologies. Her village was adopted by KVK under *Mera Gaon Mera Gaurav* scheme, which was launched in 2015 by the government. The scheme envisaged scientists to select villages as per their convenience and remain in touch with the selected villages and provide information and organize demonstrations to the farmers on technical and other related aspects of agriculture in a time frame through personal visits or on telephone. Ms Saneha came in contact with KVK Mandi in 2016, and subsequently adopted integrated farming system (IFS) with technical backstopping of KVK scientists. Later, she got training from KVK, Mandi, and qualified 200 hours skill development training program on Agricultural Extension Service Provider job under Agricultural Skill Council of India during 2016-17, Organic Grower job during 2018-2019 and then on Mushroom Grower job during 2019-20 to learn the latest technologies in agriculture. She has also received training on Zero Budget Natural Farming (ZBNF) under Agricultural Technology Management Agency (ATMA) from the State Agricultural University, Palampur. In addition to this, she has also undergone 5-day training on mushroom cultivation, 6-day training on integrated farming, and 7-day vocational training on processing and value addition of fruits, vegetables and other surplus agricultural produce at KVK Mandi. After acquiring the necessary skill in different vocations, she adopted integrated farming comprising components like crop production, dairy, nursery raising, oyster mushroom cultivation and value addition. Seeing her passion to adopt new technologies KVK scientists motivated her to adopt Integrated Farming System (IFS) model developed by KVK. She decided to continue this path and transformed her traditional farming into integration of agriculture, horticulture, dairy and other ancillary agro-based enterprises. She also switched over to ZBNF – a drive launched by the Himachal Pradesh state government to bring an end to the use of harmful chemicals in growing cash crops. Now, she is empowering other women by imparting training for natural farming techniques.

In addition to her active participation in agriculture, Ms Saneha is president of *Mahila Mandal* and founder member of Himachal Kisan Union, which is a non-

political registered Farmers' Union in Himachal Pradesh. Right from the beginning, Ms Saneha was passionate to work and to do something impactful for society especially empowering the women for their welfare. Her journey towards this passion started in 2012 when she was elected Vice President of *Chachyot Krishak Society*, a Farmer Producer organization (FPO) registered under Himachal Pradesh Cooperative Society Act, 1968. Thirty women self-help groups (SHGs) are registered under this society and each group comprises 8-10 women. She is actively engaged in formation and strengthening of women SHGs for the last 5 years in district Mandi and other parts of the state. Livelihood improvement of farm women is the main motto of this society under which many income generating activities like processing and value addition of agricultural produce, knitting and bag making, soap and candle making, mushroom cultivation, etc., were introduced. She is also working as community mobilizer for Brooke India, an international organisation, working for welfare of animals.

## **Unlocking Potential of Integrated Farming Systems and Entrepreneurial Development**

Crop husbandry, horticulture and livestock rearing are integral part of hill farming in Mandi district. Thus, integrated farming is done on small and marginal farms by the resource poor local farmers but not remunerative enough to earn their livelihood. Crop management in Mandi district is quite poor resulting in low crop productivity and profitability. Land use is also technically poor to harness the potential of farm enterprises and the crops. There is a great scope for crop diversification through fruits, vegetables and other farm enterprises in the district. To capitalize on this opportunity and support resource-poor hill farmers, a practical, economically viable, and technically sound IFS was developed by KVK Farm. This system empowers them to diversify their farming practices, and boost both productivity and profitability in a sustainable way.

In spite of hard work and endeavors, farming practices adopted by Ms Saneha were not found very scientific in the beginning owing to lack of knowledge. And the result was low yield of the crops as well as other enterprises, hence, low income inadequate to improve her livelihood. Undeterred, she continued to strive for improvement. KVK scientists advised her that to have profitable farming she should not restrict to traditional crops and motivated her to adopt IFS by including more agro-based ancillary enterprises.



Ms Saneha embarked on a new phase in her agricultural journey. She shifted from the traditional maize-wheat cycle to a more diversified approach, incorporating intercropping and cultivating black wheat, millets, oilseeds, and pulses. Additionally, she adopted improved dairy management practices, leading to a significant increase in her family's income. Vegetable nursery production, oyster mushroom cultivation and value addition of surplus agro-produce are some of the enterprises she adopted, which significantly improved the family income and livelihood. Even though Ms Saneha faced many challenges, but she never gave up and continued working hard to fulfil her dream of making farming better. Her positive attitude, unwavering optimism and commitment to transform agriculture and strong belief in a brighter future kept her going. She viewed every challenge as a chance to learn and worked hard to gain new knowledge about farming so that she could practice farming in a better way.

## From Traditional Farming to Integrated Farming System: Economic Analysis

Before adopting IFS, Ms Saneha was growing traditional crops like maize and wheat in 0.48 ha area along with rearing of milch animal but the earnings were not sufficient to meet her family needs. Returns on investment (RIO) following the traditional farming practices are given in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Economic analysis in terms of annual returns on investments in traditional agriculture

S. No.	Components	Area/Unit	Gross investment (₹/unit)	Gross returns (₹/unit)	Net income (₹/unit)
1.	Crop production (maize and wheat)	0.48 ha	13,000	45,000	32,000
2.	Milch animal (no.)	1	15,500	20,880	5,380
	Total		28,500	65,880	37,380

Later on, after acquiring several skills from the KVK, she adopted IFS at her farm. Crop production, dairy, vegetable nursery production, oyster mushroom cultivation and value addition are the major components of her farming practices in the IFS (Table 2).

**Table 2.** Components of integrated farming system

S. No.	Component	Area/unit
1.	Crop production	0.48 ha
2.	Dairy	1 milch animal
3.	Vegetable nursery	1 small unit (cap. 5,000 seedlings)
4.	Oyster mushroom production	1,200 bags/year
5.	Value addition of fruits, vegetables, pulses, millets and mushroom	1 unit (8 q)

## Crop Production

Ms Saneha grows different crops throughout the year. In summer (*khariif*), she plants maize along with soybean, black gram, and finger millet and foxtail millet. During winter (*rabi*), she grows wheat with chickpea, mustard, and black wheat under natural farming. She also made farming easier by getting special tools and machinery designed for working on hills. These tools help her to get more work done with less efforts. Details about harvests and income generation through crop production are presented in Table 3.

**Table 3.** Production of crops and income generated

S. No.	Crops	Area (ha)	Production (kg)	Gross investment (₹/unit)	Gross returns (₹/unit)	Net income (₹/unit)
1.	Maize + soybean	0.16	500 +80	59,00	12,200	63,00
2.	Blackgram	0.16	100	4,500	10,000	5,500
3.	Millets (finger millet and foxtail millet)	0.16	90	1,500	9,000	7,500
4.	Wheat + chickpea	0.32	500+100	8,000	23,600	15,600
5.	Mustard	0.08	60	1,200	3,600	2,400
6.	Black wheat	0.08	80	1,250	4,800	3,550
	Total			22,350	63,200	40,850

Ms Saneha is not just growing crops anymore. She has also expanded her farm to include dairy animals, a vegetable nursery, oyster mushroom cultivation,

and even creating new value-added products from local fruits, vegetables, and medicinal plants (Table 4).

**Table 4.** Production details under other enterprises adopted at the farm

S. No.	Components	Area/Unit	Production/unit
1.	Dairy	1 milch animal	1,305 l milk
2.	Vegetable nursery	1 unit	5,000 seedlings
3.	Oyster mushroom production	1,200 bags/year	2,400 kg
4.	Value addition of fruits, vegetables, pulses, millets and mushroom	1 unit	8 q

## Dairying

Livestock plays an important role in the economy of the hill farmers. Almost every household in Himachal Pradesh maintains livestock of one kind or the other but awareness about improved animal breeding and management practices among the farmers is low. Ms Sanaha had earlier one cattle but milk yield was very low. KVK scientists demonstrated latest technologies in animal rearing like balanced feed, mineral mixture supplementation, proper housing and health care which resulted in increased milk production of milch animal. She also replaced low milk yielding cattle with improved breeds which enhanced milk production. Now, she is fulfilling her household requirement of milk and earning reasonably good income.

## Vegetable Nursery Production

After acquiring skill on nursery raising and management from KVK, she started raising nursery of cauliflower, cabbage, brinjal and capsicum. After incorporation of nursery enterprise to her farming system, she is presently supplying quality seedlings to fellow members of SHGs for cultivation of these vegetables, thus, helping in diversification of farming in the region. On an average, she is producing about 5,000 seedlings of quality vegetable nursery thus adding ₹ 5,000 to her farm income annually.

## Oyster Mushroom Cultivation

Mushrooms especially Oyster, *Pleurotus* sp. (commonly known as *Dhingri*) is gradually becoming popular, being rich in minerals, vitamins, with very low fat

and sugar. They are good source of protein and contain many essential amino acids. Oyster mushroom is the easiest, most economical (with less investment) and easy-to-cultivate mushroom species with equally good nutritional value to that of button mushroom which can be cultivated all through the year owing to availability of number of its species. Oyster mushroom is an extremely versatile variety that can be used in all sorts of recipes, from appetizers to soups and even desserts. However, their benefits may not be as well-known as those of other varieties of mushrooms such as button mushrooms. Further, it is the best enterprise for farm women who can utilize their leisure time effectively by involving in oyster mushroom cultivation enterprise for additional income.

Fairly low investment and utilization of farm crop residues for making the compost for oyster mushroom cultivation provides huge market opportunity. Realizing this Ms Saneha learned the skills of mushroom cultivation. She adopted oyster mushroom cultivation as a subsidiary enterprise and started it in a small room with 100 bags in 2019. In the first year, she was satisfied with the enterprise and learned all the techniques from cultivation to processing and marketing of mushroom. Now, she has expanded her unit from 100 bags to 1,200 bags in a big room at her home producing about 2,400 kg of fresh mushroom per annum earning to the tune of ₹ 270,000 per annum. She is selling these fresh mushrooms in local markets and in different fairs (*melas*) organized by Government Organizations and NGOs. She now has a regular customer base for disposal of fresh mushroom produce. Apart from this, she is also drying the surplus oyster mushroom to enhance shelf-life for sale at later stages. Being a master trainer, now she is imparting trainings and motivating different SHG members who have also started producing mushroom on small scale (Fig.1). She has trained more than 2,000 farm women in her area in oyster mushroom cultivation and each member is earning Rs. 8,000-10,000 per month out of this enterprise.

### Value-Added Products

Mandi district of Himachal Pradesh is considered as a horticulture paradise on account of diverse agro-climatic conditions. Wide variety of fruits and vegetables are grown in this district but remain unharnessed and neglected on the part of farmers due to lack of knowledge of post-harvest technology. The value addition of these neglected fruits and vegetables could help in generating income among the youth. Many local farmers grow a variety of fruits and vegetables, but they do not always know how to preserve them after harvest leading to post-harvest losses. Ms Saneha perceived this as an opportunity and learned how to make



*Fig. 1. Women farmers visiting Saneha's mushroom unit*

jams, juices, jellies, pickles, chutneys, and even processed millet products. She also figured out how to dry and use mushrooms in soups, pickles, ketchups, and nuggets. This way, the food wastage is reduced and value-added products are developed. She produces about 800 kg of these value-added products every year, which brings in extra income for her farm. In addition, she imparts training to other members in SHGs to prepare such products.

Quest of Ms Saneha to acquire new skills does not end here. She learned the operation of multi-purpose processing machine under National Innovation Foundation Project at KVK, Mandi, and purchased it, which has helped her in saving time and labour. Multi-purpose processing machine is a portable machine, helps in extraction of essence and extracts from flowers and medicinal plants. This machine also has the capacity to process – a wide variety of products without breaking the seeds of the fruit or vegetable, and product development from various plants, for example, aloe vera (making juice, hair gel, face wash, shampoo, hand wash, extract, powder), mango, (chutney, jam), amla (juice, powder, extract, hair oil, candy, sweets *laddoo*), *tulsi*, *aswagandha*, *satavar*, herbs (juice, extracts), flowers like rose, *chameli*, lavender (extract and essence), etc. (Fig. 2 A-D). As wide variety of wild fruits and vegetables are available in the district, this machine could be very useful for processing purposes and definitely will add some more economic benefits to Ms Saneha as well as local community in near future (Fig. 3).



**Fig. 2.** Processing to marketing of local products: (A) Women farmers processing millets into flour, (B) Packed products ready for marketing, (C) Exhibition and sale of value-added products at KVK, Mandi, (D) Sale of products by SHGs in local fair



**Fig. 3.** Ms Saneha and her SHG members using multi-purpose processing machine

After acquiring training on food processing from KVK, Ms Saneha started processing and value addition of seasonally available fruits and vegetables. She motivated other farm women also to join hands with her to start this enterprise. Now she, along with her group members, is preparing jam, *chutney*, Rhododendron squash, *amla* candy and variety of pickles. Owing to adoption of millet cultivation in the region by large number of farmers and awareness about their nutritional benefits, she ventured into millet processing and value addition focusing primarily on millet flour, *ladoos* and biscuits, *etc.* The processed products are being sold in the local markets/fairs/Sunday *haats*.

## From Farm to Market

Ms Saneha is marketing the products made by her SHGs in various local/state/national level fairs organized by different agencies. National Rural Livelihood Mission is also providing platform in the form of Sunday *Kisan Mandi* for the sale of SHG's products. To expand her reach, she has partnered with Brooke India, an NGO dedicated to animal welfare. Their new branch office in Gohar, the Tehsil headquarters, facilitates marketing of additional products. She has also established connections with retailers and wholesalers, while exploring other avenues like direct customer marketing and utilizing various social media platforms.

## Economics - Understanding Investment Returns

Presently, farmers face the dual challenge of producing agricultural goods sustainably while managing limited resources and high cultivation costs. In this context, IFS has emerged as a powerful solution. By integrating various agricultural activities, these systems enable farms to become self-sufficient on a socio-economic level. This approach is particularly beneficial for small and marginal farmers in hilly regions, where it holds the key to improving their income. As mentioned earlier, Ms Saneha before adopting IFS took challenge to practice this system in her 0.48 ha of land in which she was growing traditional crops, which was not sufficient to meet her family expenses (Fig. 4). The economic analysis under different components adopted under IFS at her farm is presented in Fig. 5.

Ms Saneha is a highly successful entrepreneur, generating significant income through a variety of agricultural activities under IFS. Her crops and dairy operations bring in annual gross returns of ₹ 63,200 and ₹ 52,200, respectively. She also operates a small nursery unit that produces high-quality vegetable seedlings,

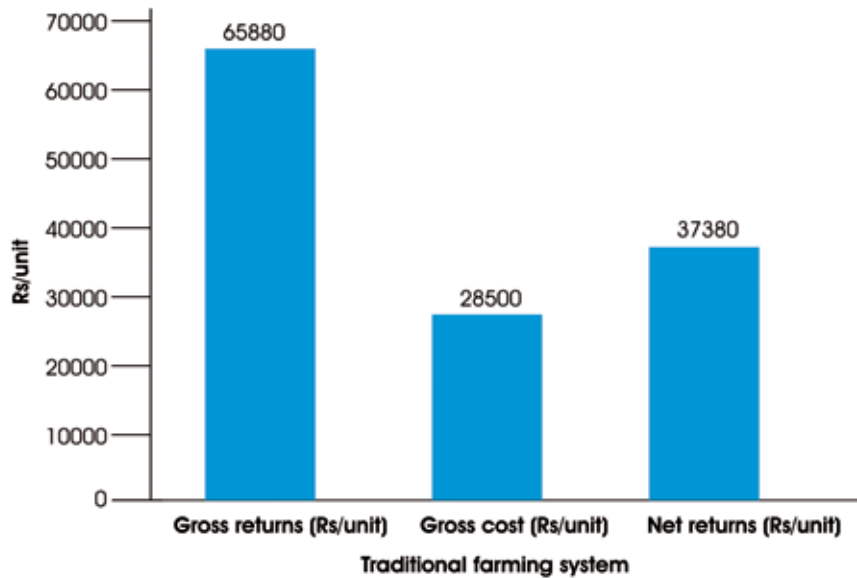


Fig. 4. Economic analysis under traditional farming system

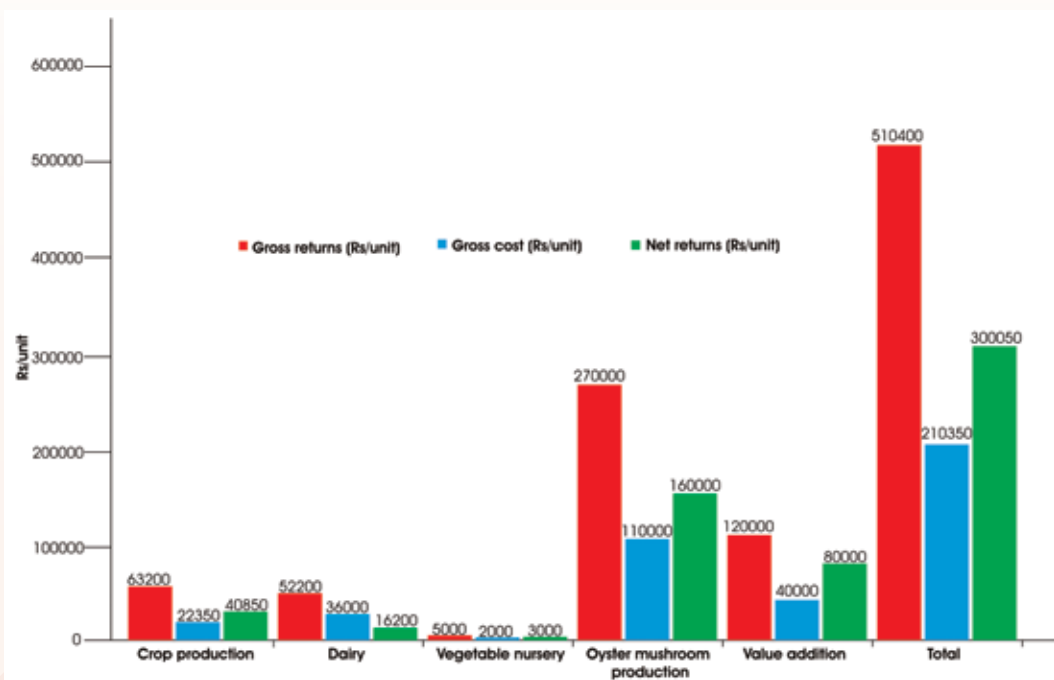


Fig. 5. Economic analysis under different components adopted under IFS



adding ₹ 5,000 to her yearly earnings. Furthermore, Ms Saneha practices year-round oyster mushroom cultivation, maintaining around 1,200 bags and earning a substantial amount of ₹ 270,000 annually. Value addition is another key component of her success. She processes fruits, vegetables, mushrooms, pulses, and millets into value-added products, producing about 800 kg per year and earning an additional income of ₹ 120,000. In total, her income from all these IFS components amounts to an impressive ₹ 5,10,400 per year.

Oyster mushroom cultivation was found the major component (Fig. 6) of IFS, contributing more than half (53%) of the total gross income followed by value addition (23.51%). Crop production, dairying, and the vegetable nursery contribute 12.38, 10.23, and 0.98 per cent, respectively, to the annual gross income. Overall, it is evident that switching from traditional to IFS proved a game-changer, boosting her gross income by an impressive 674.74 per cent compared to traditional farming methods.

## Measuring Success through High Impact of Work

Inspired and impressed by the results of IFS model, Ms Saneha roped in many of her friends into similar farming practices. The women from her village have been regularly attending training programs organized by the KVK. She took several

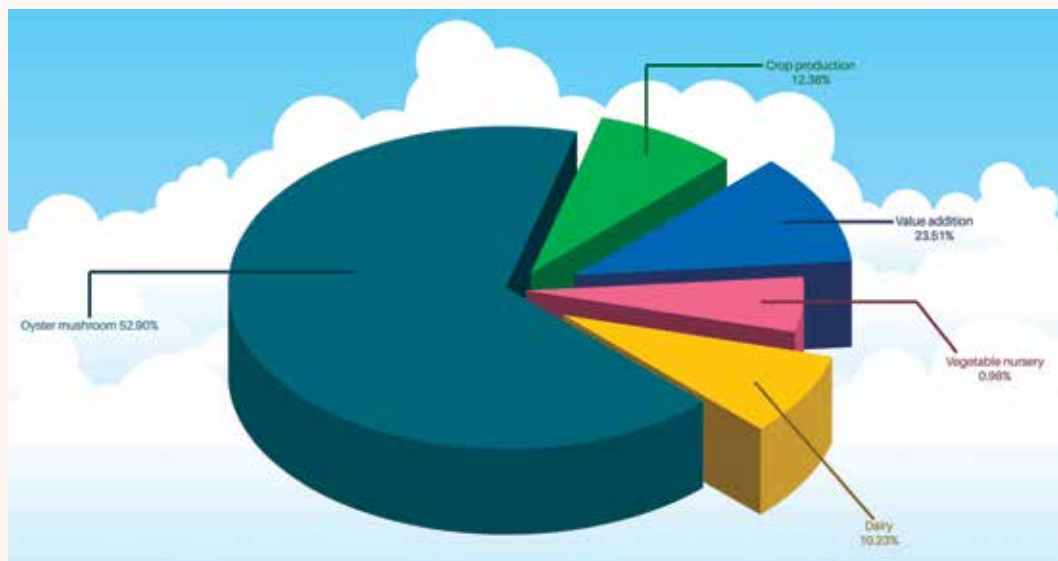


Fig. 6. Contribution (%) of different components of IFS to annual gross income

initiatives in agriculture to explore and developed the best agricultural practices that are economically beneficial and environmentally sustainable. She promotes conservation of agricultural practices such as zero budget natural farming.

A dedicated and ambitious woman who chases her dreams is an incredibly inspiring experience. Ms Sanaha exemplifies this perfectly. In a short time, she has turned her dreams into reality and become a shining example for other talented women farmers. Her success has motivated many women farmers to come forward. Ms Sanaha's achievements have not gone unnoticed — she has received several awards in recognition of her entrepreneurial spirit. But her journey was not easy – her success is built on the foundation of tough life experiences. She is playing various roles to help several women farmers to improve their livelihoods as discussed here.

### **Master Trainer**

Ms Sanaha is acting as master trainer for many developmental agencies. During the past three years (February 2021-March 2024), she conducted 42 trainings as Master Trainer to empower 1,747 women of 230 SHGs in area of mushroom cultivation, processing and value addition of agricultural produce, natural farming, management of dairy, dairy farming and vermi-composting, awareness camp on banking, pine needle fuel cakes, soap making, cow dung *diy*as, women health, multipurpose processing machine, and animal health care. It is very satisfying that



*Fig. 7. Ms Sanaha as master trainer of women for oyster mushroom cultivation*

each member of these SHGs is earning additional income of ₹ 8,000-10,000 per month (Fig. 7).

Ms Saneha's dedication goes beyond technical training. She fosters a supportive network where women can share ideas, overcome challenges, and achieve financial independence. Her work not only improves livelihoods but also revitalizes traditional food practices and empowers women beneficiaries to become agents of change. She shared some short stories of women beneficiaries.

## Beneficiaries' Experiences



**Ms Rekha**, from a small village Dari of Mandi, is a member of Nav Durga Self-Help Group. She came in contact with Ms Saneha in 2022 and started mushroom cultivation with 6-7 bags. Ms Saneha motivated her to attend 7-day training on processing and value addition of agri-produce conducted by KVK, Mandi. After attending the training, she started preparing jam, *chutney* and pickles. She also prepares traditional products like *Seera*, Nuggets (Barian) and vermicelli and earning ₹ 10,000-20,000 per month. In her words "COVID-19 has not only affected people's health but also hit the earnings of small farmers terribly. For small farming households like mine, it made everything more difficult – from sowing, harvesting to selling our produce. But after adopting ancillary enterprises like mushroom cultivation and processing and value addition of agriculture produce, I am adding ₹ 20,000-30,000 per month to family income which has contributed a lot to livelihood improvement". She gives whole credit of her success to Ms Saneha who has been continuous source of inspiration to her.



**Ms Neelam Kumari**, resident of village Kuthehad of Mandi, was inspired by the training imparted by Ms Saneha on mushroom cultivation and started growing mushroom. She started initially with production of 6-7 bags and expanded to 100 bags later. She is member of Jai Dev Kamrunag Self-Help Group. She has multiple streams of income like processing and value addition of locally available fruits and vegetables, soya processing, millet cultivation and value addition. She has a self-sustainable farm that caters to her family of five members. With her diversified income, she has now been able to step-up into a new venture of knitting for local community. She is a living example of how a woman supported with the right resources and trusted for abilities succeeds. She not only transformed her own life but became an example for many others to attain financial independence.

**Ms Krishna Kumari**, resident of village Dudar of Mandi, participated in a training program on mushroom cultivation conducted by KVK, Mandi. She started this venture with production of 300 bags. Later, Ms Saneha provided her technical guidance from time to time and now Ms Krishna Kumari is earning ₹ 10,000-20,000 per month through mushroom cultivation. Ms Krishna also made the women groups to learn about practicing some local business with easily available crop/raw materials. The KVK imparted the training on packaging of food items, preservation techniques, value addition, etc.,



to the women groups along with making them learn the marketing skills for such products. This helped women to become financially stable and independent. Now she is actively engaged in processing and value addition of fruits and vegetables especially pickles of wild fruits and vegetables made by her are gaining popularity among local community.



**Ms Chinta Devi** of village Thalehad, narrates her success story by paying her gratitude to Ms Saneha who inspired her for integrated farming system and subsidiary agriculture. Ms Chinta said, "It is only through Ms Saneha I came in contact with KVK scientists and attended training on mushroom cultivation, dairy farming and processing and value addition of fruits and vegetables organized by KVK Mandi from time to time. KVK scientists, apart from Ms Saneha, motivated me to adopt integrated farming system and I added dairy, vegetable production, mushroom cultivation and processing and value addition to my traditional crop production components". Now Ms Chinta has a small dairy unit of three milch cattle fetching an additional average income ₹ 25,000 per month apart from ₹ 10,000-15,000 from oyster mushroom cultivation as additional income.

### **Millet Ambassador**

During the International Year of Millets (2023), Ms Saneha was actively engaged in motivating the farm women in production as well as processing and value-added products of millets. She along with her friends also made great efforts for understanding the good agricultural practices required for millet cultivation. Along

with the practices, they were also provided with the necessary millet processing training where all of them learned about preparing various value-added products of millets like multigrain flours, *ragi laddoos*, *burfi*, biscuits, etc. She, along with other members of SHGs, is now engaged in preparing and selling these value-added products and earning remunerative returns. Traditional Himachali foods like *kachories*, *siddus*, momos, etc., fortified with millets are also gaining popularity through these SHGs. Ms Sanaha's next mission is to revive the magic of millets for nutritional security.

### **Joined Hands with Brooke India**

Ms Sanaha is also working as Field Assistant in Brooke India – an international organisation for animal welfare. Brooke India is an International Charity working for improving the lives of vulnerable working equids and the communities in some of the most challenging areas. She is now Community Mobiliser for two districts (Mandi and Chamba) by Brooke India. This organization has multi-disciplinary teams with core strengths in animal health and welfare and community development, including human behaviour change, gender empowerment, livelihoods, and resilience. This organisation has also focus on capacity building of women SHGs.

### **National Recognition through Electronic and Print Media**

Ms Sanaha's journey gained national recognition in 2023. *Doordarshan*, a national television channel, invited her to their Shimla studio for an interview (Fig. 8). She spoke about her experiences with integrated farming in rural area of Himachal Pradesh, and the interview was met with positive feedback from viewers, especially young people including women. Her experiences were covered by print media also.

In November 2023, she also presented her work on crop diversification in National Seminar on Plant Biodiversity for Food, Nutrition and Health Security in North-West Himalayas (PBFSNWH) organised by Indian Society of Plant Genetic Resources (ISPGR), Shoolini University and ICAR-National Bureau of Plant Genetic Resources (ICAR-NBPGR) in collaboration with Trust for Advancement of Agricultural Sciences (TAAS), Alliance for Bioversity International and CIAT, at Shoolini University Solan, Himachal Pradesh. She was bestowed with best oral presentation award during this seminar. In addition, she has been awarded from many other organizations for her entrepreneurial work (Fig. 9).



*Fig. 8. Ms Saneha sharing her experiences in Natural Farming on Doordarshan national channel*

## **A Mother, Entrepreneur, and Champion for Women's Empowerment**

Ms Saneha is an inspiration to her friends and family, especially to her young daughter, who aspires to become as vibrant and active as her mother one day. She gives full attention to her family and also takes care of her daughter's aspirations. In addition to managing her family, farms, and the FPO, Ms Saneha runs a successful grocery shop in her village. Her story exemplifies how women can be self-sufficient and achieve greatness when given opportunities. Her dedication to agriculture and commendable work for empowering women, and strengthening SHGs has been recognized with numerous awards from various organizations.

## **Journey from Adversity to Prosperity**

Ms Saneha is not only earning for family but employing many women in the area, and is recognized as a role model and a mentor for several women entrepreneurs. She gives the credit of her success to the scientists at the KVK, Mandi and other development departments at state level and Brooke India for the gradual improvement in her confidence through the proper exposure and inculcating



**Fig. 9.** Awards and recognitions of Ms Saneha: (A) Best oral presentation award from Dr RS Paroda, (B) Innovative farm women award by CSKHPKV, Palampur, (C) 1st prize for millet recipe contest organised by KVK, Mandi, (D) Award from Department of Environment



the necessary skills for practicing sustainable farming and entrepreneurship. She never missed any opportunity of training to develop or sharpen her skills. Her dedication to learning proved invaluable. She diligently attended every training program offered by the KVK and conferred with certificates, which became stepping stones to her success, leading to positions as Field Assistant and now Community Mobilizer for two districts with Brook India. Her active participation in trainings and women's welfare initiatives equipped her to travel across the country, sharing her knowledge and experiences with others.

Ms Saneha's journey of a rural entrepreneur has inspired a wave of change, breaking the shackles of traditional gender roles and empowering women to pursue their aspirations. Looking ahead, she envisions expanding her business, establishing a mushroom processing unit and creating a brand for her products. Her ambitions include forging collaborations with fellow entrepreneurs and SHGs to create a network that advocates women's empowerment and sustainable agriculture. Her aspiration to create a model farm that serves as a demonstration unit for the wider community underscores her commitment to brightly lighten-up not only the lives of women but also the entire landscape. Her journey from adversity to prosperity is a powerful narrative of how one woman's determination, combined with the support of SHGs, can breakdown gender barriers, reshape power dynamics and elevate the identity of women in a community.

## **Lessons Learnt**

Women play a pivotal role in all economic and crop production activities in the agriculture, in general, and hills in particular. In Himachal Pradesh, women farmers are the back-bone of subsistence agriculture. Yet due to gender insensitivity, they do not receive the desired recognition. Women farmers' existence what to say of needs and rights have been largely ignored and in many cases their condition is hardly little better than that of unpaid farm labour (in reality they are because their contributions as family labour go unpaid). Therefore, the need to mainstream the women farmers in developmental activities and utilize their potential with adequate recompense is of utmost importance. About 80 per cent of the field work in agriculture, from sowing to harvesting, post-harvest management and dairy management is done by women farmers. The tasks are laborious and since the women, in general, are unaware of the latest technical know-how, their output and productivity are low. There is need to cut the drudgery of women farmers and make their efforts worthwhile and economical.

To uplift the socio-economic status of this group, Ms Saneha took a lead to mobilize women farmers to form SHGs and knocked the doors of each and every development agency to provide technical guidance as well as financial support. Team of scientists from KVK, Mandi, educated the women farmers through awareness programs, provided them technical assistance through capacity building, and motivated them to generate on-farm as well as off-farm income through various activities. Earlier Ms Saneha was reluctant to adopt IFS model as she was not having large area of land to grow different crops but the encouragement from KVK scientists motivated her to adopt integrated farming.

Her annual income was just around 65,000 which improved exponentially to the tune of 5 lakh per annum with the adoption of integration of crop production, nursery raising, mushroom production and value addition of surplus agricultural produce. After seeing the results, Ms Saneha realized that induction of IFS principles and technological interventions on the basis of land use planning, the small and marginal farmers like her can also fetch better income and improve livelihood. She opined that merely subsistence farming is not enough to the resource poor farmers but promoting secondary agriculture and agribusiness start-ups would give the financial stability to rural farming families. The institutional backstopping, direct marketing linkages, quality control and resource management are the drivers of the success in agribusiness start-up. She felt that her family became economically self-reliant through these agribusiness ventures. A few years back, she was a 'job seeker' but now a 'job provider' to many needy women of her area. Her story is an inspiration to all farmers, particularly those with limited land. It shows that by embracing additional income streams alongside traditional farming and animal husbandry, significant financial security can be achieved. Her success lies in incorporating ancillary enterprises like mushroom cultivation and value addition that generated income every day year-round. This integrated farming approach is a much better option, especially for small-scale farmers and rural women, for promoting livelihood security and financial stability.

## **A Beacon for Women Entrepreneurs**

Ms Saneha, a woman of remarkable enthusiasm and dedication, stands as a testament to the success achievable in agriculture. Her journey highlights the crucial role of flagship schemes in empowering farm women. The KVK, Mandi, working hand-in-hand with relevant departments, strives to connect farming families with these beneficial programs.

Drawing from her rich experience, Ms Sanaha advocates for the IFS model as an innovative tool. This model helps transform underperforming hill production systems into highly profitable ventures. By utilizing existing farm resources, the IFS model fosters sustainable growth in farm income, livelihoods, and employment. According to her, key ingredients for entrepreneurial success are - (i) *Hard work and honesty*: Building a solid foundation through dedication and integrity; (ii) *Foresight*: Anticipating future trends and adapting strategies accordingly; (iii) *Risk-taking ability*: Embracing calculated risks to seize opportunities for innovation; (iv) *Optimism*: Maintaining a positive mindset even in the face of challenges; (v) *Creativity*: Thinking out of box to develop innovative solutions; and (vi) *Strong inter-personal skills*: Building effective communication and collaboration.

Women's involvement in agriculture is an avenue for significant economic and social empowerment. Through cooperatives, self-help groups, land ownership initiatives, and support for micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs), she has firm opinion that we can create a right path for women to achieve: (i) *Self-sufficiency*: Financial independence and the ability to meet their needs; (ii) *Economic stability*: Enhanced financial security and improved quality of life; (iii) *Independent decision-making*: Confidence to make informed choices for themselves and their families; (iv) *Increased purchasing power*: Greater economic control and ability to access resources; and (v) *Stronger socio-cultural participation*: Increased voice and influence within their communities.

Ms Sanaha's message to aspiring young entrepreneurs is one of unwavering optimism and perseverance. She believes that (i) *Nothing is impossible*: Believe in your ability to achieve your goals; (ii) *Creative thinking leads to success*: Innovation and hard work are the cornerstones of achievement; (iii) *Together we achieve more*: Collaboration and teamwork can produce remarkable results; and (iv) *Hard work is rewarded*: Dedication paves the way for success (Fig. 10).

## Conclusion

From an impoverished homemaker to a successful farmer and entrepreneur, the story of Ms Sanaha Sharma is an inspiring tale of how women in rural India can take charge of their destiny. As an entrepreneur, establishing a sound financial strategy with a focus on cash flow management is essential. While the journey in agriculture can be challenging, a strong sense of purpose and a vision to improve lives makes it worthwhile. The KVK, Mandi, is striving hard to create a supportive



*Fig. 10. Inspiration to rural women folks*

environment that fosters the growth and development of entrepreneurs like Ms Saneha, for the benefit of community and society as a whole.

## About Ms Saneha Sharma

Ms Saneha, a determined farmer from a remote village in Mandi, Himachal Pradesh, pursued her education even after an early marriage, and graduated from IGNOU in 2007. Realizing her passion for learning, her husband and in-laws supported her further education. She completed computer and fashion design courses at ITI, Mandi, sharpening her skills and opening a boutique in 2015. However, traditional farming limitations led her to KVK and a FPO to empower farm women.



Driven by a desire to improve lives, Ms Saneha's journey began in 2012. Elected Vice President of *Chachyot Krishak Society*, a registered FPO, she championed women's welfare. The society focuses on livelihood improvement for farm women through income-generating activities like processing agricultural produce, handicrafts, and mushroom cultivation. Currently as President, Saneha leads 30 women's SHGs with 8-10 members in each group.

Ms Saneha became a leading force in the International Year of Millets-2023 in Mandi district of Himachal Pradesh. She motivates farm women in millet production, processing, and value addition. SHG members are creating and selling millet-based products like multigrain flour, *ragi laddoos*, *burfi*, biscuits and traditional Himachali foods fortified with millets, promoting both nutrition and reviving local cuisine.

Previously a Field Assistant at Brook India, an animal welfare organization, Ms Saneha now serves as the Himachal Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of this organization, furthering the mission of empowering women's SHGs.

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