

STUDENT LEARNING IN ACTION: Exploring SHGs through the RAWE Module



In this blog, Aparna Radhakrishnan shares her experience with leading the implementation of the SHG Module of the Rural Agricultural Work Experience (RAWE) programme for the final year BSc Agriculture students.

CONTEXT

Agricultural Extension is no longer confined to farm advisories alone—it is a transformative process that fosters rural empowerment, entrepreneurship, and inclusive development. Thus, the teaching and skill training for the students should also be oriented in such a manner. An excellent way to teach extension is through practical training, and a compelling manifestation of this is to help students learn from the Self-Help Group (SHG) movement, which has empowered millions of rural women across India. The SHG movement in India, rooted in collective self-help among rural women, has evolved into a powerful force inspiring Farmer Producer Organisations (FPOs), driving inclusive development and prosperity.



The SHG Module (Module 15) within the Kerala Agricultural University's Rural Agricultural Work Experience (RAWE) programme is a significant component. It provides students with direct exposure to the functioning of Self-Help Groups (SHGs)/ Joint Liability Groups (JLGs). Conducted over four days, this compulsory module offers practical insights into SHG formation, operations, and their role in rural empowerment. It sensitises students to social dynamics, participatory extension, and community-based entrepreneurship. SHGs—largely women's collectives—serve as platforms for savings, credit, and mutual support, evolving into engines of economic and social transformation across India. In Kerala, the

Kudumbashree model exemplifies these achievements, though scaling requires sustained innovation and supportive policies.

BOX 1: SHGs: A VEHICLE FOR CHANGE

As of early 2025, India has over 9.09 million (90.9 lakh) SHGs, mobilising more than 100.5 million (10.05 crore) rural women households under the National Rural Livelihoods Mission (NRLM). SHGs are active in all Indian states, with extensive networks in Bihar, West Bengal, Uttar Pradesh, and Andhra Pradesh. In Kerala, the SHG movement is led by the Kudumbashree Mission, which has formed over 271,000 SHGs (Neighbourhood Groups) and mobilised more than 4 million women.

Kudumbashree has been widely recognised for:

- Enhancing women's income and economic independence
- Fostering leadership skills and community participation
- Increasing access to formal credit and reducing dependence on informal moneylenders
- Enabling women to engage in agriculture, micro-enterprises, and local governance

IMPLEMENTATION OF THE MODULE

This four-day module was implemented during 26-29 April 2025, and the programme had the following components (Table 1)

Table 1: Programme schedule

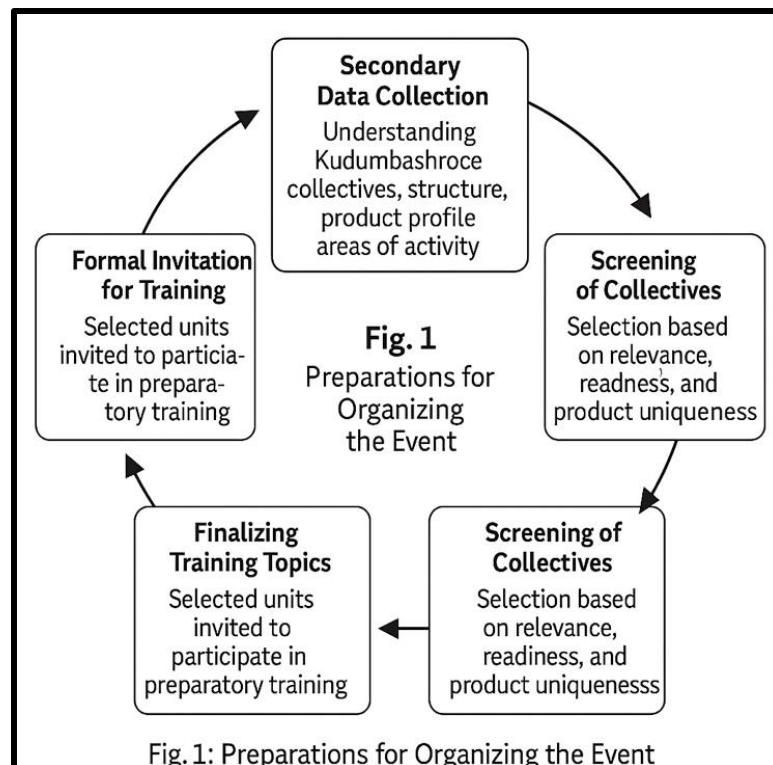
Day & Date	Main Activities	Remarks
Day 1 26 Apr	SHE LEADS EXPO	Preparations began approximately two weeks in advance, encompassing the arrangement of physical facilities, submission of finance requests, selection and booking of the venue, invitation of SHG participants, coordination with faculty/resource persons, preparation of publicity materials, finalisation of stall layouts, and organisation of logistics, including transport, refreshments, and display infrastructure.
Day 2 27 Apr	Classroom orientation and preparatory sessions for field visits	Students were briefed on SHG concepts, extension linkages, and expectations for field learning.
Day 3 28 Apr	Field visits to selected SHGs/Joint Liability Groups (JLGs), followed by group discussions	Visits focused on enterprise models, innovation levels, and socio-economic settings; discussions deepened understanding of SHG diversity and challenges.
Day 4 29 Apr	Skill-building workshops	Led by ICAR-CIFT and Kerala Agricultural University experts, the workshop concluded with structured student reflections.



SHE LEADS EXPO – A Celebration of Women Entrepreneurs

We started the module with the organisation of an exhibition of SHG products, which was held on 26 April 2025. This exhibition, named SHE LEADS EXPO, hosted over 20 SHGs from across the district, showcasing diverse products—from millet mixes and mushroom powders to art, pickles, handicrafts, and natural cosmetics. Students were assigned to support the SHG stalls, facilitating smooth interactions and gaining direct exposure to local enterprise dynamics.

Preparations for organising this event started about 2 weeks ago, and it involved several steps (Fig. 1).



SHG Field Visits – Grounding Learning in Reality

Following the She Expo in Trivandrum, facilitation teams of students contacted selected SHGs and Joint Liability Groups (JLGs) that had showcased their enterprises to encourage continued engagement. This

led to field visits, scheduled after the Expo and before Day 2 classroom sessions, forming part of the module's experiential learning. Though brief and observation-based, the visits enabled students to interact with women entrepreneurs, understand SHG operations, and see firsthand the impact of micro-enterprises. The chosen SHGs (Box 2) reflected diverse commodities, institutional models, and innovation levels. Faculty curated these visits and later prepared detailed case profiles.

Box 2: Details of a few SHGs visited:

- Karthika Food Products, Kottukal: An SHG producing banana chips, yam chips, and tapioca flour, demonstrating an integrated model that spans raw material procurement to retail marketing.
- SM Fashion, Nemom: A woman-led digital accessory boutique leveraging online platforms to overcome market access barriers—an example of digital innovation and solo entrepreneurship.
- Arya Mushroom, Vithura: A JLG functioning under Navajyoti SHG, known for its scientific approach to mushroom cultivation.
- Garden Rose & Harithodaya, Ulloor: SHGs leading the Millet Café initiative—showcasing successful convergence with health and nutrition missions and promoting millet-based healthy food choices.

These visits not only enriched students' understanding of the diversity and resilience of rural women entrepreneurs but also provided them with concrete examples of how SHGs function as engines of social and economic transformation, inspiring a deep sense of respect and appreciation for these women's efforts.

Skill Building through Targeted Training

Unlike conventional programs, this activity was student-led, with students managing all aspects—from assessing training needs and selecting participants to inviting experts, arranging facilities, and handling logistics. The day featured two technical sessions equipping SHG members with practical skills in value addition and agripreneurship.

Session 1, on Fish Processing and Value Addition by Dr. Asha Latha (ICAR-CIFT), covered the development of fish-based products, entrepreneurial use of fish waste, and hygiene, quality, and branding of products. Session 2, on Fruit Value Addition and Packaging Innovations by Dr. Suma Divakar (Dept. of Home Science, College of Agriculture, Vellayani), demonstrated value-added products, modern packaging techniques, and low-cost, local-resource technologies for SHG enterprises.

These sessions enriched SHG members technically and provided students with hands-on experience in planning, coordination, and execution of grassroots-level training, showcasing active student facilitation as a tool for promoting rural innovation, enterprise development, and women's empowerment, moving beyond passive observation to meaningful engagement.



Lessons Learned by Students

During the feedback session, students shared the following reflections:

1. *“Participatory engagement deepens learning. When we directly interacted with SHG members through exhibitions, field visits, and training, it moved us beyond theoretical understanding”*
2. *“We learned that mobilising SHGs for expos and training depends on aligning with local schedules, involving local institutions, and communicating the benefits of participation. Mobilisation isn’t just about attendance—it’s about creating shared ownership and enthusiasm for learning.”*
3. *“SHGs are diverse and dynamic. They differ widely in leadership strength, stage of development, functional focus, and innovation levels.”*
4. *“We observed that many SHGs still face marketing and digital literacy gaps. Despite having innovative products, challenges in branding, packaging, digital marketing, and e-commerce limit their ability to grow and reach wider markets.”*
5. *“We realised that convergence is crucial for sustainability. Linkages with extension services, local self-governments, Kudumbashree, financial institutions, and enterprise development agencies are essential for viability, scaling up, and resilience.”*
6. *“Tailored capacity building yields better results. One-size-fits-all training rarely works. SHG members respond better when support matches their enterprise type, market context, and experience level—especially in value addition, certification, packaging innovation, and digital finance.”*
7. *“This experience showed us that extension students can serve as catalysts. With our energy, digital skills, and scientific exposure, we can play a role as facilitators, communicators, and knowledge mediators—if guided effectively.”*



SHG module leaders and the Head of the Department of Agricultural Extension Education, with student leaders of the module

WAYS TO ENHANCE SHG LEARNING IN THE RAWE PROGRAMME

Based on the implementation of this module, we suggest the following steps in enhancing the value of the RAWE SHG learning module.

- **Integrate Evidence-Based SHG Learning Models:** Encourage the adoption of experiential learning approaches within RAWE that expose students to diverse and successful SHG models.
- **Encourage Participatory Monitoring and Evaluation:** Involve students in basic longitudinal assessments of SHG activities to help them understand institutional dynamics, sustainability challenges, and the long-term socio-economic impact on rural livelihoods, especially among women.
- **Facilitate Exposure to SHG–FPO Convergence:** Include modules or field visits that help students explore the synergies between SHGs and Farmer-Producer Organisations (FPOs).
- **Promote Digital Literacy in SHGs through Student Involvement:** Engage students in activities that enhance digital awareness among SHG members, including the use of mobile-based advisories, ICT tools for record keeping, and access to digital marketplaces. This mutual learning enhances digital inclusion in rural communities.
- **Create Platforms for Student–SHG Cross-Learning:** Foster structured interactions where students and SHG members can share knowledge, co-develop local solutions, and document indigenous practices.
- **Rename the SHG Module in RAWE Curriculum:** Consider renaming and repositioning the SHG module in the RAWE programme as the “*Community Collective Engagement Module*” or “*Participatory Rural Institution Module*” to reflect better its expanded role in community development, social capital formation, and local governance.

END NOTE

The SHG Module under RAWE 2025 was more than just a curricular requirement—it was a transformative learning experience that connected classroom theory with real-world practice. For students, it offered an immersion into grassroots innovation and resilience. For SHG members, it provided a platform to showcase their strength, creativity, and leadership. As agricultural extension continues to develop, integrating experiential learning and SHG participation is crucial for fostering a gender-equitable, economically vibrant, and community-driven rural transformation.

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