

Fostering Rural Empowerment: Integrating PashuSakhi Model for Sustainable Livestock Management

Sai Priyanka Pagadala¹, Madne Kailash¹, Vara Prasad Chittam²

¹Subject Matter Specialist, ²Head and Senior Scientist

DDS – KrishiVigyan Kendra, Zaheerabad, Sangareddy District, Telangana-502228.

Corresponding Author: pagadalasaipriyankanaidu@gmail.com

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Introduction

The livestock sector serves as a cornerstone of rural livelihoods, especially for small-scale farmers and women in India. Goat and sheep rearing, in particular, offer vital sources of income, nutrition, and resilience for marginalized communities. This initiative was complemented by the PashuSakhi model, a community-based livestock extension system that has revolutionized rural extension services across India.

Small livestock such as goats and sheep play a crucial role in supporting rural households, particularly women, who are the primary caregivers of livestock (Kisku & Singh, 2022). These animals provide income, nutrition (milk and meat), emergency assets, and even serve as a source of traditional medicine. Despite their significance, small-scale livestock farmers face numerous challenges. High mortality and morbidity among livestock pose significant challenges, causing economic and emotional distress for rural households, particularly for women who are the primary caregivers. Seasonal feed scarcity and genetic degradation further hamper productivity, reducing the viability of livestock farming. The situation is exacerbated by limited access to timely and affordable veterinary services, leading to preventable diseases and losses. Market inefficiencies, including the absence of fair pricing mechanisms and proper market linkages, force farmers to rely on middlemen, often resulting in unfavourable terms. Moreover, social barriers restrict women from directly accessing veterinary care and technical knowledge, despite their central role in managing livestock. These interconnected issues collectively undermine the sustainability and profitability of livestock farming in rural communities. These challenges necessitate a localized, accessible, and inclusive extension system that empowers rural women to enhance livestock management practices sustainably.

To handle with these challenges a community-led veterinary extension model of PashuSakhi was developed (Ponnusamy et al., 2016). The PashuSakhi model emerged as a part of the Mahila Kisan Sashaktikaran Pariyojana (MKSP), a sub-component of the National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM). This initiative focuses on empowering women farmers by enhancing their skills, knowledge, and access to resources. States like Rajasthan, Maharashtra, and Jharkhand have successfully implemented this model, leveraging Public-Private Partnerships (PPP) and extensive grassroots-level efforts led by Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs). These collaborations have demonstrated significant positive outcomes, transforming rural livelihoods and establishing the PashuSakhi model as a sustainable and scalable approach for community-based livestock management.

The PashuSakhi Model: Bridging the gap in extension services

While the training program addressed immediate skill-building, the PashuSakhi model represents a scalable, long-term solution to the systemic challenges in livestock extension services. Developed by organizations like The Goat Trust (Sanjeev Kumar, 2023) and implemented in partnership with government schemes such as the National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM), the PashuSakhi model empowers rural women to become community-based livestock service providers.

Key features of the PashuSakhi model

Women-centric approach: Semi-literate women are selected from their communities to undergo technical training in livestock management. This approach ensures that primary caregivers of livestock—women—are directly equipped with knowledge and skills.

Comprehensive training: The PashuSakhis' are trained in:

- * Disease prevention and first aid.
- * Feeding, breeding, and housing management.
- * Preparation of herbal remedies and ethno veterinary practices.
- * Enterprise development and input supply.

Community ownership: By involving local goat farmers and family heads in the selection process, the model ensures community support and ownership.

Sustainability through entrepreneurship: PashuSakhis sustain themselves by selling inputs like mineral bricks and herbal remedies while providing services like first aid and vaccination. This entrepreneurial approach ensures the long-term viability of the model.

Monitoring and feedback: PashuSakhis regularly visit households to monitor livestock health, provide feedback on best practices, and maintain data for better disease management and market linkages.

DDS KVK's integration of the PashuSakhi model

Inspired by the success of the PashuSakhi model, DDS KrishiVigyanKendra with support from Deccan Development Society has adopted its principles in its extension programs. During the scientific goat and sheep management trainings, participants were introduced to the PashuSakhi approach, encouraging them to take on leadership roles within their communities. The training program was designed to address these challenges by equipping rural women with the skills and knowledge necessary for scientific goat and sheep management.

Salient features from KVKs training approach

- * **Scientific housing management:** Participants learned about designing optimal housing systems to ensure proper ventilation, hygiene, and safety for livestock. These practices aim to reduce disease susceptibility and improve productivity.
- * **Feeding practices:** Sessions on cost-effective and balanced feeding practices demonstrated how locally available resources could be utilized to meet nutritional needs.
- * **Ethno-veterinary practices:** A major focus was on sustainable health management through traditional

knowledge. Women were trained to prepare:

- Herbal Masala Bolus for digestion.
- Mineral Bricks to address nutritional deficiencies.
- Herbal Dewormers as natural alternatives to chemical treatments.

Breeding management: Insights on breed selection and oestrous cycle management helped participants understand how to plan breeding for enhanced productivity.

Market linkages: Interactive sessions discussed strategies to access markets, ensuring better prices for livestock products and reducing dependency on middlemen.

Way forward

The blend of DDS KVK's training program with the PashuSakhi model underscores the transformative potential of women-centric, community-led extension services in rural livestock management. The training

not only equipped them with technical knowledge but also emphasized the importance of data collection and record-keeping for livestock management, promoting group-based activities, such as rotational grazing and feed management and acting as local leaders who bridge the gap between farmers and veterinary services. Scaling up such initiatives demands a structured and phased approach. The current training program represents the first phase, focusing on equipping women with foundational knowledge and skills as PashuSakhi master trainers. Over the next three months, these women will be closely monitored and supported through follow-up sessions to assess their field activities, provide guidance, and ensure the availability of essential medicines.

After six months, the second phase of training will be organized to reinforce their knowledge through a comprehensive refresher course. This phase will also introduce updates on innovative technologies and practices, empowering the PashuSakhis to stay up-to-date and effective in their roles. To ensure long-term impact, this phased training approach must be complemented by broader measures. Policy support is crucial, with increased investment in women-led extension systems and their integration into national livestock development programs. Capacity building through regular training and refresher courses will ensure that PashuSakhis remain efficient on the latest practices and technologies. Strengthening market linkages by establishing producer groups and cooperatives will provide better market access and fair pricing for livestock products. Finally, fostering research and innovation by encouraging collaborations between research institutions and rural communities will help develop context-specific solutions on breeds, feed and management to be tailored to the needs of small-scale livestock farmers.

Together, these efforts not only strengthened scientific livestock management practices but also empowered women to take charge of their livelihoods, transforming traditional rural economies into resilient, self-reliant systems. By integrating scientific training programs with community-led extension models like PashuSakhi, DDS KVK Zaheerabad has demonstrated a holistic approach to improving rural livelihoods. As India continues to strive for rural development and gender equity, such models of inclusive growth will play a pivotal role in shaping a brighter future for its farmers.

References

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