

Women Smallholder Farmers and the Rise of Commercial Seed Production in Surkhet, Nepal

Bibhu Thapaliya,
Gender Equality and Social Inclusion Adviser, CASA Nepal

May 2025



In Nepal, over 70% of women are actively involved in farming, yet only a fraction participates in commercial farming. Their critical contributions to household farming often go unrecognised, and their potential for income generation remains untapped. Commercial vegetable seed production, however, offers a promising opportunity, particularly for the aspiring women in Gurbakot municipality, Surkhet (Karnali Province). With support from the FCDO-funded Commercial Agriculture for Smallholders and Agribusiness (CASA) Programme, [Pabitra Seed Company](#) is transforming this opportunity into a livelihood revolution for hundreds of women.

TACKLING A MARKET GAP

Nepal's seed market is import-reliant, with only 50% of national vegetable seed demand met by domestic production. There is a gradual increase, but demand outstrips supply. In the fiscal year 2018/19, Nepal imported 424 tonnes of vegetable seeds alone worth NPR 553 million (£3.9 million) to fulfil market demand. CASA identified this imbalance as a dual opportunity: boost domestic seed production and empower smallholder farmers, especially women, to fill the gap.

By partnering with Pabitra Seed Company in Surkhet, CASA has helped to bridge this divide. The aim was clear: increase smallholder productivity, reduce reliance on imports, and address the gender gap in commercial agriculture. CASA focuses on enabling the 'missing middle' – farmers wishing to scale but lacking market access, technical knowledge, or support. Nearly 40% of these smallholders live on less than \$2 a day, and many (around 50%) are women.

GROWING TOGETHER: PABITRA AND WOMEN'S FARMER GROUPS

Pabitra works with both individual/household farmers and farmers' groups. Their work with all-women groups highlights how women seed producers can influence change at both household and market levels through access to market linkages and technical training.

Two examples are Taaja Tarkari Samuha (fresh vegetable group) and Pragatishil Gai Bhainsi Samuha

(progressive cow-buffalo group) in Ordi, Gurbakot. These women have been working with Pabitra for 5-6 years under consistent contractual relationships. Each group has a leader who communicates the group's concerns and interest in commercial seed production to market players like Pabitra.

Pabitra supports each group member from the start of the seed production cycle. The company helps procure foundation and breeder seeds through the Nepal Agricultural Research Council (NARC) for a six-month seed production process. Pabitra staff assist with planting, seed extraction and drying, and connects the women with the Seed Quality Control Centre (SQCC), which conducts three field inspections. Women do first-level sorting by removing visibly rotten seeds. Afterwards, Pabitra aggregates the seeds from collection centres.

"I cultivate seeds of okra, beans, maize, peas and other vegetables. Pabitra has guided me through every step – from planting to drying. Their mentorship has helped me maximise yields," shares one woman farmer. "Being part of the women's group gives us confidence to raise issues and negotiate better prices."



Members of the farmers' groups participating in a group discussion, sharing about benefits and concerns related to seed farming

FOSTERING MARKET LINKAGES

Pabitra sought to work with 4,000 smallholder farmers across multiple provinces as part of its expansion plan. Meanwhile, one of the biggest barriers for women farmers in Surkhet has been accessing fair and consistent markets. CASA supported Pabitra in establishing direct purchase agreements with farmers, helping align supply with demand. This enabled women to sell their seeds at competitive prices, ensuring a steady income stream and reducing dependency on intermediaries.

“We cultivate wheat for seed production across acres of land. Mid-March to April is the harvest season. Pabitra’s truck comes to my door to pick quintals of seeds. It’s very helpful that we don’t have to worry about not finding a market that is both accessible and consistent,” said another woman farmer.

With better market access, commercial prospects have improved. Women in Pabitra’s supply chain now earn an average of NPR 75,000 annually. The income supports savings, agricultural expenses and household needs. While absolute financial autonomy may be limited in shared household structures, signing contracts with Pabitra and receiving payment directly has improved women’s confidence and their ability to plan financially.



A farmer in Pabitra’s supply chain in her wheat field, from which she will sell seeds to Pabitra after harvesting

BUILDING SKILLS, BUILDING FUTURES

CASA also provided technical assistance through a seed expert who delivered a 3-day training of trainers (ToT) to Junior Technical Assistants, who then facilitated two-day training sessions for farmer groups.

The training covered the entire seed production process: land selection, space isolation, production planning, plantation, seed plot registration, quality seed production (incorporating flood and drought resistant seeds), innovations, Good Agricultural Practices (GAP), pesticide/ insecticide use, seed extraction, drying, grading, storage, marketing plans, field inspection, and navigating government services.



Participants in the training on quality seed production, with the CASA-supported Junior Technical Assistant introducing herself before starting

Women were specifically encouraged to participate in the training and received extensive guidance on seed selection, storage, and quality assurance. They also learned about climate-resilient seed varieties, organic farming techniques, and post-harvest management.

“From the training, we also learnt which variety of seed yields more productivity. They suggested Swargadari wheat seed to us. The seed yields quality wheat, and the flour of this wheat is of high quality. So, there is better market price for this,” said one woman farmer.

A RIPPLE EFFECT OF EMPOWERMENT

CASA’s support has had a catalytic effect on Surkhet’s agricultural landscape. Inspired by the success stories of their neighbours and relatives, more women have shown interest in seed production. The project has contributed to strengthening the local seed supply system by empowering smallholders. Aspiring women farmers have gained easy access to high-quality seeds, training and markets – helping narrow gender gaps in commercial agriculture in Gurvakot, Surkhet.

This partnership between CASA and Pabitra is more than a commercial venture; it is a blueprint for inclusive agricultural growth. As more stakeholders, including local governments and financial institutions, rally behind this model, the seeds of change sown in Surkhet are poised to bloom across Nepal’s agricultural landscape.



Commercial Agriculture for Smallholders and Agribusiness

