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Original Article**Mina Gurung: A Success Story of Mushroom Farming in Nuwakot, Nepal****Nikam Jaiswal* and Dr. Gurshaminder Singh***UIAS, Chandigarh University, Gharuan, Mohali, Punjab (140413)***Corresponding author: nikamjaiswal567@gmail.com**Received: 09/09/2024**Published: 12/09/2024***INTRODUCTION**

Nuwakot, a district nestled in the Bagmati Province of Nepal, is known for its rich cultural heritage, scenic beauty and an agrarian lifestyle that has sustained generations of families. Among the terraced fields and verdant hillsides, a new story of agricultural success is taking root—one that has brought both prosperity and a renewed sense of purpose to a determined woman named Mina Gurung. Mina's journey from a struggling farmer to a successful entrepreneur in mushroom farming is a testament to the resilience and potential of Nepal's rural women.

Early Life and Struggles:

Mina Gurung was born in a small village in Nuwakot, where agriculture was the primary means of livelihood. Like many in her community, Mina grew up working in the fields, helping her family grow traditional crops such as maize, millet and rice. Life was tough, with the meager earnings from farming barely enough to support the family. Mina's parents, like many others in the region, had to contend with the unpredictable weather, poor infrastructure and the lack of access to modern farming techniques. Despite these challenges, they managed to send Mina to the local school where she completed her secondary education.

After completing her education, Mina got married and moved to a nearby village. Her husband, also a farmer, faced the same challenges of subsistence farming. With two children to raise, the couple found it increasingly difficult to make ends meet. The low returns from traditional farming methods were not enough to provide a comfortable life or ensure a secure future for their children. Mina began to think about alternative sources of income but opportunities were scarce in the rural areas of Nepal.

Discovering the Potential of Mushroom Farming:

Mina's journey into mushroom farming began somewhat serendipitously. One day, during a visit to the district headquarters, Mina attended a local agricultural fair. It was there that she first learned about the potential of mushroom farming from a stall set up by an agricultural extension office. The stall featured different varieties of mushrooms and the staff explained how mushroom cultivation could be done even with limited land. The idea intrigued Mina. She learned that mushrooms,

particularly oyster and button varieties, could be grown in controlled environments and had a short cultivation cycle compared to traditional crops.

Returning home, Mina couldn't stop thinking about the possibility of starting her own mushroom farm. However, the idea of venturing into something entirely new was daunting. She had no experience with mushroom farming and the initial investment seemed risky, especially given the family's financial situation. But the more she researched, the more she realized the potential benefits. Mushrooms were in demand in nearby towns and even in Kathmandu where they fetched a good price.



Taking the Leap: Costs and Initial Investments:

Determined to explore this new opportunity, Mina attended a training program on mushroom farming offered by the District Agriculture Development Office. The training covered everything from setting up a mushroom farm, managing the growing conditions to harvesting and marketing the produce. Encouraged by what she learned; Mina decided to take the plunge. She convinced her husband to support her idea and used their small savings along with a loan from a local cooperative to set up a small mushroom farm in a shed behind their house.

The initial investment required for the mushroom farming setup included the cost of materials, labor and other essential expenses. Here's a breakdown of Mina's initial investment:

1. Shed Construction: Mina constructed a simple shed using bamboo, wood and plastic sheets to create a controlled environment suitable for mushroom cultivation. The cost of materials and labor amounted to approximately NPR 40,000.

2. Substrate Preparation and Growing Medium: The primary substrate for mushroom cultivation was straw which was readily available locally. Mina also needed to purchase spawn (mushroom seeds) from a supplier. The total cost for substrate preparation and spawn was around NPR 20,000.

3. Equipment and Tools: Basic equipment such as thermometers, hygrometers, plastic bags and sterilization tools were necessary to maintain the correct growing conditions. These items cost approximately NPR 15,000.

4. Training and Miscellaneous Expenses: Mina's training program, along with transportation costs, amounted to NPR 10,000. Other expenses, such as electricity for maintaining the right temperature and humidity, were around NPR 5,000.

Total Initial Investment: NPR 90,000

Mina began with oyster mushrooms, which are known for being relatively easy to grow. She constructed simple racks using bamboo and plastic sheets to create a humid environment suitable for mushroom cultivation. The training had taught her how to sterilize the growing medium and maintain the right temperature and humidity. It was a meticulous process but Mina was determined to make it work.

First Harvest and Initial Returns:

The first harvest, though modest, was a significant milestone for Mina. She produced around 50 kilograms of oyster mushrooms in her first cycle which she sold at the local market for NPR 150 per kilogram. This yielded a total revenue of NPR 7,500. While the profits from the first harvest were modest, they gave Mina the confidence that she was on the right path.

Encouraged by the initial success, Mina reinvested the earnings back into her farm. She purchased more spawn, expanded her shed by adding additional racks, and experimented with other varieties such as button mushrooms, which required slightly different growing conditions but offered a higher market price.

Scaling Up and Expanding the Business:

As Mina's farm became more successful, she realized the potential for further expansion. She reinvested the profits into the business, buying better equipment and increasing the production capacity. She also began to explore value-added products such as dried mushrooms which could be sold at a premium price and had a longer shelf life. Mina's mushrooms started reaching markets beyond Nuwakot, including Kathmandu, where they were sold in supermarkets and restaurants.

Seeing the success of her farm, other women in the village became interested in mushroom farming. Mina began to share her knowledge, organizing informal training sessions and helping others set up their own farms. This collective effort not only increased the production of mushrooms in the region but also empowered many women, providing them with a source of income and independence.

Mina's farm also started to attract attention from NGOs and government agencies involved in promoting sustainable agriculture. She was invited to speak at various forums and workshops, where she shared her experiences and encouraged others to take up mushroom farming. Her story was featured in local newspapers and television programs, making her a role model for many aspiring farmers.

Overcoming Challenges:

Mina's journey was not without its challenges. The initial investment put a strain on the family's finances and there were times when she doubted whether the venture would succeed. The learning curve was steep and she faced issues such as contamination of the growing medium and fluctuating

temperatures which affected the yield. There were also logistical challenges in transporting the mushrooms to the market, especially during the monsoon season when roads became impassable.

However, Mina's determination never wavered. She sought advice from agricultural experts and fellow farmers, constantly learning and adapting her methods. Her husband and children also became involved in the farm, helping with the daily tasks. The support from her family and the community was crucial in overcoming the hurdles. Gradually, the farm began to thrive and the profits started to grow.

Impact on the Community and Future Plans:

The success of Mina Gurung's mushroom farm had a profound impact on her community. It showed that with the right knowledge, determination and support, it was possible to break free from the cycle of poverty and achieve financial independence. The increased income from mushroom farming allowed Mina to provide a better life for her family. She was able to send her children to good schools and improve the living conditions of her household.

Mina's success also had a ripple effect on the local economy. As more farmers took up mushroom farming, there was a greater demand for supplies and services related to mushroom cultivation. Local businesses, such as those selling agricultural inputs, benefited from this increased demand. Additionally, the availability of fresh mushrooms in the local markets improved the diet and nutrition of the community.

Looking ahead, Mina has ambitious plans for the future. She wants to expand her farm further, possibly venturing into the production of other high-value crops such as organic vegetables and herbs. She is also considering starting a small processing unit to produce packaged mushroom products that can be sold in urban markets and even exported. Mina is keen to continue her work in empowering other women in her community and she dreams of establishing a cooperative that would bring together mushroom farmers from across the district to pool resources and share knowledge.

CONCLUSION:

Mina Gurung's journey from a struggling farmer to a successful mushroom entrepreneur is an inspiring example of how innovation and perseverance can transform lives. Her story is a reminder that with the right support and determination, it is possible to overcome the challenges of rural life and create a better future. Mina's success in mushroom farming has not only changed her life but has also brought hope and opportunity to her community. As she continues to grow her business and help others, Mina is a shining example of the potential that lies within Nepal's rural women.