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TAMIL NADU

Collective farming comes to the help of destitute and widowed women



"The main aim of collective farming is to discourage migration from villages and to provide food security to the families"

Some members of Tamil Nadu Women's Collective network working on a field.

Nearly 200 landless women and widows in eight districts of the State are working under the umbrella of Tamil Nadu Women's Collective network to do farming and allied activities for the last three years.

Interestingly, when vast tracts of lands are being sold off to commercial realtors in the name of development, thus bringing down the cultivation areas, the women's collective has been instrumental in identifying wastelands. It has also identified lands that have been left fallow by its owners in Tuticorin, Virudhu Nagar, Madurai, Salem, Thiruvannamalai, Vellore, Kancheepuram, and Thiruvallur districts to help single, widowed ladies in the villages to cultivate those lands.

The land is taken on a three-year' lease and women are trained by experienced and well known experts about the A-Z of different crop cultivation techniques, the method of making bio inputs and ways to prevent infestation using their own bio pest repellents.

"The main aim of collective farming is to discourage migration from villages and to provide food security to the families," said institute secretary Ponnuthayee.

The institute conducted a study in 13 villages to understand the lifestyle of destitute and widowed women. The study found that many of these women either have small pieces of fragmented rain-fed lands, or no land at all. The majority of them did not have the required investment for growing crops and many of them did not have access to proper water sources in their land holdings. Elaborating on how the study was conducted, Ms. Ponnuthayee said: "Empowerment of rural women has always been an important agenda in our collective. We conduct annual women meetings in our office and several women attend these meetings. During one such meet, some of them voiced their grievance that being the sole bread winner for their families, they were finding it difficult to lead their daily lives as they could not get any work as labourers throughout the year. Though sometimes they went to towns to work as construction labourers or domestic help, they came back to their village after some time due to health and family issues. To empower such women posed a big challenge for us."

The collective debated this problem for some years before they hit upon the idea of forming the women into groups and helping them do some agriculture-related activities.

"We decided to meet and talk to the women in all the eight districts personally to identify those who required help. During these meetings, some women told us that they were quite knowledgeable in agriculture as they have been helping their husbands in the fields. Others helped us to identify those who required help and some volunteered to be part of the work," explains Ms. Ponnuthayee

Several rounds of discussions and meetings followed, and the women were formed into groups.

village.

The groups were also asked to identify fallow lands for growing some crops, the size of the land, lease period, types of crop to be grown, opening a bank account, revolving system of labour — all under the supervision of the network. The network funded Rs. 10,000 to the groups for all their farming related activities.

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At present, the women do not market their products grown organically outside the village. The production of crop

yield from the collective farming provides food for their family for at least 15 days a month.

Though the groups, at present, have not gained much financially, they are confident of earning a decent income from selling their produce in the future. Considering the high cost involved in purchase of seeds for their farming

activities, the network is planning to develop seed producers in their group and establish a seed bank for their