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From untouchable to organic: Dalit women sow change in India

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Small-scale women farmers are working together to create a new Green Revolution in southern India

Topics: India (/topics/topic/international-location/central-south-asia/india.html), Agriculture (/topics/topic/issue/agriculture.html), Women's Rights (/topics/topic/issue/womens-rights.html)

1. One acre, one small miracle

CHAPTERS

ERACHI, India — The plot sits across from barren sugarcane fields and behind this small village in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu. Just one acre of sandy dirt, it probably never gets a second glance. But for 65-year-old Kasiammal Karuppasamy, it's a small miracle.

"I've worked the land my whole life," says the stern, bowlegged woman in her native Tamil. "But I was always a kuli," she says, meaning she has spent her life as one of India's 340 million landless laborers (http://www.hindu.com/2007/12/09/stories/2007120953911200.htm), who typically earn less than a dollar a day.

But the modest parcel on which she stands is about to change that. Kasiammal and 11 others of her local chapter of the Tamil Nadu Women's Collective (TNWC), a statewide grassroots organization composed mainly of Dalit women, were preparing to sow millet, green gram and pulses on the land they have leased. "This is the first time we can decide what we grow and how," says Kassiamal, rolling her shoulders back slightly and pressing her heels into the ground.

Kasiammal came of age during

India's so-called Green Revolution (http://www.ifpri.org/publication/green-revolution), which began in the 1960's, when the country shifted to high-yield crop varieties and modern agricultural techniques. It turned the world's second-most-populous nation into a leading self-sustaining food producer. She watched warily as the massive harvests sank water tables and as chemical fertilizers made the soil "tired and salty." But "as a kuli," she says, "you follow orders."

Part of the Tamil Nadu Women's Collective seed bank, stored in the Vasudevanallur district office. Jean Friedman-Rudovsky

Farming wasn't the only area of Kasiammal's life in which she did what she was told. The former kuli grew up at a time when "untouchable" was still an acceptable term. She remembers removing her shoes when walking through an upper-caste neighborhood and never asking for a dog, which were forbidden for Dalits, lest their pets mate with those belonging to higher-caste owners. In the fields, when the landowners and their sons came to fetch kuli girls "to do what they wanted with them," Kasiammal says, she knew to keep her mouth shut.

Despite the narrow canal of sewage that runs from the upper-caste neighborhood to her home in Erachi's Dalit section and her uneven access to potable water, Kasiammal says things have changed. "We have this," she says, pointing her chin toward the soil.

Kasiammal Karuppasamy in the Tamil Nadu Women's Collective farming plot in Erachi. Jean Friedman-Rudovsky

Kasiammal's plot is one of about 25 collective pilot farms throughout the state, an initiative that stems from two decades of work by TNWC members. Founded in 1994 by a handful of women, the collective is now a powerful federation of local groups in more than 1,500 villages across the state. They have approximately 60,000 members, mostly Dalit. The members are young and old, married and widowed, and they live in villages, towns and cities.

The status of women in India became a world-news talking point in 2012, when the country erupted in protest over a horrific gang rape on a bus in New Delhi. More recently, two lower-caste girls were gang raped and hung from a tree (http://www.aljazeera.com/news/asia/2014/05/indian-girls-found-hanging-after-gang-rape-20145296281088141 7.html) in the northern state of Uttar Pradesh. But India's struggles with gender equity are not new: it had already been ranked the worst of the G-20 nations (http://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/jun/15/worst-place-women-afghanistan-india) in which to be a woman and among the five worst in the entire world (just behind Afghanistan, Pakistan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Somalia). In recent years, there have been some advances. By law, the country's women are now practically equal to men. But those rights often exist only on paper, especially in rural areas.

The collective has been on a mission to change that one village at a time. Through strategic organizing,

peer support and leveraging its combined power, the group has confronted domestic violence, predatory money lenders, caste discrimination, environmental destruction and more. It is active in politics, too, encouraging and training members to run for office. More than 1,000 of them have run for state and local office in the last 10 years, and over 500 have been elected.

“We were talking so much about climate change and food security [that] it made sense to try to take control of how farming is done in our communities.”

—Sheelu Francis
co-founder, Tamil Nadu Women’s Collective

The turn toward agriculture was logical, explains Sheelu Francis, one of TNWC’s founders and its current president. “We were talking so much about climate change and food security and the need to change to ecological and sustainable farming after the Green Revolution,” she says in her office in Chennai, “it made sense to try to take control of how farming is done in our communities.” So, about eight years ago, the organization began running workshops on sustainable cultivation, seed saving, organic-fertilizer production and more. In late 2010, it tried its first five collective pilot farms, each year adding a few more.

That may not seem like much, but TNWC could be at the forefront of agricultural change in India, where small-scale collective farming is emerging as one viable solution to the country’s agricultural challenges. Up to 2,000 farmers are abandoning agriculture per day (http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/columns/sainath/over-2000-fewer-farmers-every-day/article4674190.ece) — for reasons that range from a changing environment to the withdrawal of government support from agriculture and farmer debt, which has been instrumental in the world’s worst suicide epidemic (http://www.counterpunch.org/2009/02/12/the-largest-wave-of-suicides-in-history). More than 85 percent of India’s farmers work land that is one acre or less, according to the UN Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) — about the size of Kasiammal’s plot. Nonprofit organizations and state institutions around the country are implementing programs that encourage group farming, particularly among women, who “are far better at it than men,” says Peter Kenmore, director of the FAO’s India office.

He knows that it’s important to work with women, especially since the number of rural women who work in agriculture (http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/columns/sainath/when-leelabai-runs-the-farm/article4921390.ece) is substantial — approximately 80 percent (http://www.oxfamindia.org/media/press-releases/land-my-own-campaign-womens-right-over-property) — and growing. The question then becomes, how. “The hard part is to figure out how small-scale farmers can make a living, enabling them to pay for medical support, schooling and access to information,” Kenmore says, “while also

developing more-sustainable methods to ensure India's food security."

The women of TNWC have some ideas about that.

2. Here, there are no Sundays

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It is just past 10 on a Sunday morning when Reventi, a young woman bent under the weight of one small child on her hip while another tugs at her sari, appears in the doorway of Ponnuthai Sappani's home. The director of TNWC's Vasudevanallur district office flashes a sparkling white smile and waves the family inside. Reventi enters, handing Ponnuthai a typed letter.

Ponnuthai scans the document, issued by the local court. The judge, she explains, is stalling on the young mother's request that her husband be ordered to return. He had abandoned Reventi and taken up with another woman after Reventi reported being abused by him, including an attempted strangling and a stabbing. But she wants him back, because her children are hungry and because having him around made life more manageable than it is for a single woman in rural India.

Ponnuthai doesn't judge (she made a similar choice years ago). Reventi must wait for another letter, she says. Reventi and the children stay for tea, enjoying the cool breeze of Ponnuthai's ceiling fan. By the time they leave, it's almost lunchtime. "Here, there are no Sundays," Ponnuthai says, as she steps into her small kitchen to prepare some rice.

Indeed, there is almost no downtime for Ponnuthai or the other five Vasudevanallur employees, who work in an office below her apartment. Over the decades, the staff — like those at all TNWC headquarters — have become pillars for the community, a perpetually sought-out source of advice, support, document interpretation, interventions and tea.

"This began with a few of us saying that women's rights are human rights, which was a radical notion here in 1994," says Lidwin Singarayan, a nun and TNWC co-founder.

M. Papa Madasamy and her fellow Women's Collective chapter members go over the books of their loan funds. Jean Friedman-Rudovsky

The Tamil Nadu Women's Collective was started in Chennai, the state capital, by Lidwin, Sheelu and four others. For many years, they received financial support from Catholic Aid India, which they used to pay staff and run a few campaigns. But, says Sheelu, their bottom-up approach of giving local chapters control doesn't sit well with funders, and for several years now, the collective has been getting by on the occasional private donation and membership dues. Sometimes, staff members go months without pay.

As the organization grew, members started forming sanghams — neighborhood groups of approximately 20 women, who meet periodically. These became the basis for workshops on women's rights, political advocacy campaigns, literacy training and more.

"I never left the house before I got involved in Women's Collective," says Tamilselvi Rajandran, from the village of Subramaniyapuram. The statement is echoed by dozens of TNWC members throughout Tamil Nadu. "I didn't realize that what I went through, others did too," said Kasthuri Durai Pandi of

Thithampatti, another common refrain. “Once I did, I felt like we could do something about it.”

One of the first things the sanghams did something about was predatory money lenders. India has more than 300 million poor people (http://www.ruralpovertyportal.org/country/home/tags/india), about a third of the world’s impoverished. Banks typically have no incentive to grant loans to this segment of the population, so when the poor need cash, they turn to unregulated money lenders. Borrowers can end up indebted to them for decades.

The sanghams set up a collective banking-and-lending system, similar to models created by the government (http://www.cgap.org/publications/sustainability-self-help-groups-india-two-analyses) in 1992. From there it was a short leap from collective lending to collective farming. Research shows that the obstacles for individual farmers are too numerous: lack of capital, little access to markets and no way to weather economic fluctuations, especially with the region’s recurring droughts and tired soil.

“The sanghams were a natural place for group ownership and commitment,” Sheelu says. Getting the land was the easiest part. Some pilot farms are on abandoned farmland, for which the state government has promised to process titles. In other instances, a TNWC member’s family leases them land in exchange for a third of the crop.

“This is a long-term project. We have to make the land healthy again.”

—Lidwin Singarayan
co-founder, Tamil Nadu Women’s Collective

The farms all adhere to some basic principles: cash needed during the planting season comes as a loan from the sangham. They always plant nutrient-rich crops such as sesame, pulses and millet, a native grain dense in protein and vitamins, which some call Indian quinoa. The harvest is first offered to members at below- market rates and then sold locally. Profit depends on the yearly rains. All the collective plots are organic, even though the yield would be higher if chemical fertilizers were used. “This is a long-term project,” Lidwin explains. “We have to make the land healthy again.”

“Collectives such as these are not the socialist collectives of the past, which were very large in scale, constituted of forcibly requisitioned land, and where people had little say in decision making, little incentive to work hard and no ownership of their resources,” says Bina Agarwal, a professor of development economics and environment at the University of Manchester. She calls this alternative model “bottom-up collectivities” based on small, voluntary groups with participatory decision-making and checks and balances for accountability, such as fines for members who don’t follow agreed-upon rules.

Gender matters, too. The Deccan Development Society, a grassroots organization in the neighboring state of Andhra Pradesh, tried collective farms with only men, then men and women but now only funds women. “When they have a solid organization, when women trust each other, they improve market access, and even if the price collapses one year on a crop, with good governance, they can withstand this,” Kenmore says.

The collective has had mixed results, admits Sheelu. When the weather has been good, the women have been able to sustain their families for about half a year on the food and income — a great success. But in 2011, for example, massive drought meant they were barely able to earn back their investment.

There have been other issues, too. They have bickered about whether every member is pulling her own weight in the fields. The women of the salt-mining sanghams didn’t use their loans to buy their own salt plots once the cash was in their hands. Though they eventually paid off their debt, they continue working as wage laborers, rather than small-business owners as planned. One group in a town north of Madurai folded because loans were not repaid; a collective artisan project failed because some members didn’t show up for work.

Tamil Nadu Women’s Collective members in the village of T.N. Puthukudi at a monthly meeting at their neighborhood temple. Jean Friedman-Rudovsky

But the women of TNWC don’t seem deterred. Rather, they say that dealing with such difficulties helps them prepare for more collective work.

“Of course there will be challenges,” Maheshwari, who will be farming with Kasiammal, says. “It’s always possible to say, ‘Oh, I feel sick. I can’t come to do weeding’ or ‘My child needs to go to the doctor, so I can’t work.’ But when that happens, we make them pay a fine or work twice as hard later. Plus, we’ve been handling each other’s money for years now. We know each other. We can do this.”

3. A matter of semantics

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The rains are late here in Usilampatti and most of the villagers are waiting for a steady downpour before planting, fearful that their crop will die from the monsoon's late arrival — like last year. Chandra Ramer's in-laws took a chance and sowed early; that decision weighs heavy on her now.

Along with four others, she is bent at the waist, using a hoe to cut weeds that threaten their millet crop. The women's faded saris form a pale rainbow, slashes of contrast on a green-and-brown canvas. Fields stretch to the horizon in all directions. At one point, she looks up with annoyance at the gorgeous blue sky, joking later that the white puffy clouds were personally mocking her. They offer no promise of precipitation, and her cotton crop has already gone dry. Her millet, a much less water-dependent crop, could last another week. "But even millet needs some rain," she says.

Chandra has worked this land for 15 years. While her husband and his brothers make the final decisions on what gets planted and how, she's always part of the discussion. And when the men disappear — to seek employment when the rains are late, for example — she sometimes has to take control. But only recently has Chandra started calling herself a farmer.

Chandra Ramer, second from left, and her fellow Usilampatti-area farmers take a break from weeding a plot of land

that desperately needs rain. Jean Friedman-Rudovsky

"Women don't consider themselves farmers," says Rucha Chitnis, formerly of Women's Earth Alliance, which funds women's groups working on climate and water- and land-rights issues. This is particularly absurd, considering that women do the majority of farm work in India, she says. Though statistics show that women don't outnumber men in agriculture by much, studies find that in India, the average woman spends much more time in the fields than the average man. In northern India, for example, a woman typically works more hours than a man and a pair of oxen combined.

Women are not regarded as farmers, in part, because of semantics. The Indian government defines "farmer" as "one with land," but less than 13 percent of rural women in India have land titles (http://www.oxfamindia.org/media/press-releases/land-my-own-campaign-womens-right-over-property).

But that's not all. "This is about women's work not being valued," Chitnis says. "Women manage every aspect of farm work. They plant, sow, weed and harvest — but are not landowners. They process the products, but men largely control the market and income."

"Real justice is about bringing marginalized women to the decision-making table."

— Rucha Chitnis
former program director, Women's Earth Alliance

Biases against women are built into India's agricultural system, says Agarwal, "from lack of access to loans for leasing farming equipment to male government workers, whose job it is to disseminate information about new techniques or market opportunities, [but] who mainly seek out other men to talk to." The Tamil Nadu Women's Collective is hoping to fill that void by setting up workshops on farming techniques and sustainability and using the sanghams to access agricultural loans and expand potential markets. It is building a women's farmers association to spread its ideas and want the government to restore time-honored seed-saving techniques — knowledge (http://www.greenconserve.com/content/community-seed-banks) traditionally held (http://www.earthisland.org/journal/index.php/elist/eListRead/seeds_and_their_keepers_are_key_to_preserving_indias_food_diversity) by women (http://www.mnn.com/food/healthy-eating/blogs/women-do-important-seed-keeping-in-india).

Last year, TNWC members also started attending monthly farmers meetings. These are open sessions run by the state government in Chennai, where all farmers are invited to discuss agricultural needs and policy. "We were the first women to step foot inside those meetings — ever," says Sheelu, explaining

that “the first time when our women went for the meeting, the collector thought that they have come to a wrong place and directed them to social-welfare department, which is in charge of widows’ pension and other social schemes for women.”

“Real justice,” Chitnis says, “is about bringing marginalized women to the decision-making table.”

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4. Life is too messy for easy answers

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Ponnuthai is standing on the balcony of a friend’s home, ruminating on gains and setbacks the TNWC women have made over the years. She’s not one to talk about her own life, but she does say this: “Economic independence for women often made things worse in the home. As soon as we started earning our own money, our husbands decided they didn’t need to spend their wage on food or school fees, so they started drinking or gambling it away. Then there was even more — .” She stops herself and cocks her fist.

Women here grow up in and still inhabit a society with conservative values, and leaving abusive husbands isn’t always the answer. Like Reventi, the abused wife, a good portion of the collective’s members could make it on their own but stay with their husbands because of the shame of being single or divorced.

Ponnuthai Sappani harvests some yucca in the farm land that she manages, but that is technically owned by her husband. Jean Friedman-Rudovsky

Ponnuthai is still married, though she has effectively banished her husband to a concrete hut near their fields. A large, ex-military man with white hair, a moustache and a penchant for drinking, he visits her occasionally to ask for money. Ponnuthai says it was only a few years ago that the beatings stopped, mainly because he had become weak and her son started defending his mother. Another woman adds sarcastically: “My husband? Yes, he still exists, but I pretend that he is no longer existing.” For these women, improving their lives means choosing to remain part of their communities even at the cost of independence.

Though outside the Western feminist paradigm, this mix of resistance to and acceptance of tradition co-exists in India, where things are “more nuanced and hidden,” Chitnis says. “But that doesn’t mean [women] aren’t subverting the norm or dissenting in ways we are not even able to see.”

“If it seemed like we were out to break up families or turn our society on its head, we could have never gotten to the point to be trying to change our country’s farming model.”

—Lidwin Singarayan
co-founder, Tamil Nadu Women's Collective

Indeed, TNWC hasn't just fortified women — it's changed men. At first, husbands tried controlling the loans that came through the women's sanghams. But the wives pushed back and in several communities, men relented, deciding it was easier to start their own lending groups. "Why should women be the only ones with this advantage?" asks G. Marirajan Gurusamy, a Men's Savings Group founder. Five others who founded groups in their own villages nodded their heads in agreement.

Indeed, Lidwin explains that she sees women's empowerment as a slow process, and that not rocking the boat isn't a sign of defeat — rather, it's a strategic decision. "Our members can't attend a meeting unless they have their husband's permission, or at least they weren't able to at first," she says with characteristic frankness. "If it seemed like we were out to break up families or turn our society on its head, we could never have lasted this long. We could have never gotten to the point to be trying to change our country's farming model."

Sheelu laughs lightly when asked what the answer is. "There is no one solution," she says, because life is too messy for that. "A whole lot of things have to change. We have been successful in getting men to recognize women's strength and their contributions to society. We have gotten women to recognize the power in themselves. That's a start."