

Sustainable and resilient farming-Women Collective's efforts

Women farmers always had strong farming abilities, but have been marginalised. The Tamil Nadu Women's Collective with its one lakh members, is determined to work till women farmers' efforts are recognized, agroecology becomes the dominant practice and farm environment is saved from harmful chemicals.



One of the members
working on the collective
farm

Although most women in the rural areas work full-time on farm, they aren't recognized as farmers. In Tamil Nadu, women still don't have the same access as men to land ownership, which limits them from accessing inputs and finance and affecting their independence and social status in their communities.

Under such situations, Women's Collective started working since 1994, with dalit farm women. Beginning with issues of health, soon expanded its goals to find sustainable solutions to food security and family health as both were closely related. For the collective, agroecology means traditional sustainable and resilient farming practices suitable to the local context.

Only one percent of the one lakh women of the Women Collective owns land.

Women's Collective organised various trainings and workshops on healthy foods and healthy soils. Farmers are trained on production of biologicals for plant protection and organic fertilisers. They learn to use locally available ingredients like cow dung, urine, milk – thus reducing their dependence on external inputs and farming expenses. While work load may not be lesser, agroecological practices certainly result in lesser expenses, healthier families and household food security.

Members are encouraged to adopt mixed cropping systems than mono cropping as they create a natural ecosystem rich in biodiversity which is better for the soil and better harvests. Women farmers adopt agroecological practices, primarily for household food security, and produce on a small scale. Although not all members of the collective are able to access or lease land, they are encouraged to have an organic kitchen garden. (See Box 1)

Box 1

Kalpanja is a housewife living in a village outside of Nagercoil. With her ailing health, she is not able to go for work. After attending the workshops on importance of healthy foods, she got inspired to start her own kitchen garden. She started growing vegetables organically, six months ago. She uses kitchen wastes and cow dung as natural fertilizers. She says having a kitchen garden isn't much work and is cheap since most of the things she uses are for free. Kalpanja's children have also been inspired by her kitchen garden. Her sons often look for new plants on the way to his house or school. Motivated by her, many women are seeking Women's Collective support in procuring seeds.

Farmers are encouraged to grow millets which are rich in nutrients and suitable to local context and culture. Millets are the traditional foods in the region. But, green revolution agriculture had promoted conversion of traditional mixed farming to paddy cultivation. Importantly, in most districts of Tamil Nadu cultivating rice is difficult due to water scarcity. The Women's Collective therefore promoted cultivation of millets, as the women farmers would have fewer problems with water scarcity and malnutrition.



Kalpanja

Collective farming

During one of the workshops, Philomina coordinator in Kanyakumari district, came in contact with Jamila, a woman who owned three acres of land in Kanyakumari district. Jamila offered the members of the collective to start a collective farm on her land for free with the condition that she be allowed to join the group.

Six women formed a group and agreed to do collective farming. The expenditure of the collective farm has been shared by the six members and the idea is that all crops will be equally shared and whatever is left will be sold to members of Women's Collective. Jamila signed a contract where the other members will use her farmland up to five years.

The idea is to plant banana trees, tapioca and vegetables. Women's Collective provided Rs. 4000 rupees as initial investment. Philomina and the members believe that their initiative to start a collective farm will inspire other members to do the same in the future.

The network deals with issues of lack of formal credit and ownership of land. They hardly have access to conventional banking system. Each member of the sangams saves at least 100 rupees per month, which is spent on seeds, health and educational expenses. As is the case in the state of Tamil Nadu, women's access to land is minimal and approximately, only one percent of the one lakh strong Collective owns land.

As a network, they find strength in working with each other and are encouraged to express themselves and become leaders. The social network helps women to maintain a certain level of food security through collective farming and sangams- lowering the risk of absolute poverty with improved yields and financial/social support. The children of these communities are able to see their mothers, sisters taking charge and raise their voices. Having women role models working with agroecology sustains farming traditions and inspires younger women.

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