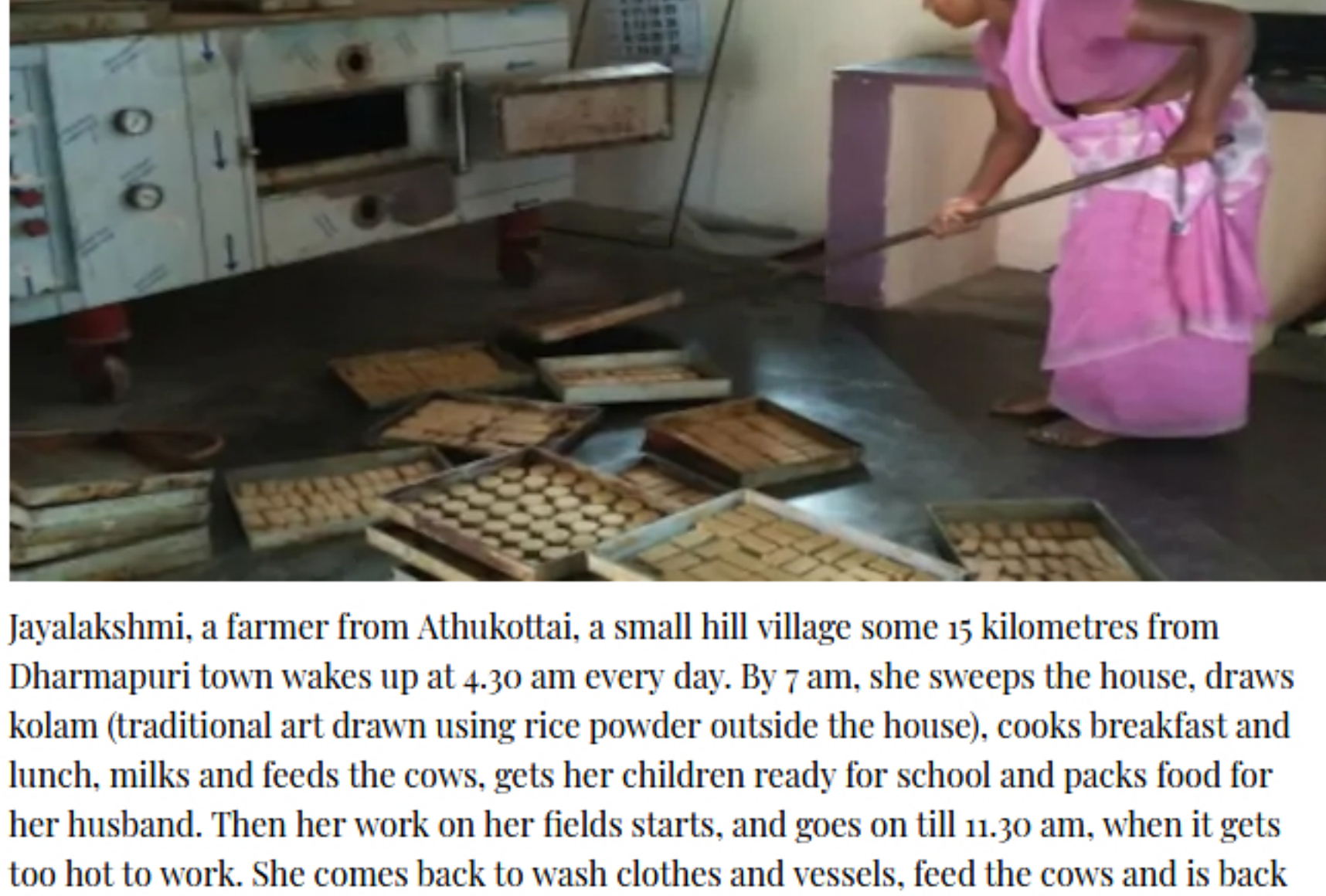


INDIA

12.8% landholding, 90% work: Tamil Nadu women battle patriarchy while shouldering dual burden of housework, farming

When women come together, it is not just about cropping or cropping patterns. "It is also a social approach to farming."

Karthikeyan Hemalatha | March 28, 2018 10:43:33 IST



Jayalakshmi, a farmer from Athukottai, a small hill village some 15 kilometres from Dharmapuri town wakes up at 4.30 am every day. By 7 am, she sweeps the house, draws kolam (traditional art drawn using rice powder outside the house), cooks breakfast and lunch, milks and feeds the cows, gets her children ready for school and packs food for her husband. Then her work on her fields starts, and goes on till 11.30 am, when it gets too hot to work. She comes back to wash clothes and vessels, feed the cows and is back on the field by 3 pm and works till 6 pm. She then cooks dinner, helps her children with their homework and finally gets to sleep by 10 pm. "My husband will kick the plate if I serve him food that I cooked in the morning," she said. "I, along with every other woman in this village, do all the housework as well as 90 percent of the work on the field. But will anyone say this is Jayalakshmi's house or Jayalakshmi's field? Only my husband's name will be used," she said, deeply aware of the patriarchy around her. "I need my husband just to plough the land and protect the fields from pigs during nights," said Valliammal, a woman farmer from another village.

Women in farming — for the most part — don't need men. Women like Jayalakshmi work nearly 18 hours a day, carry the dual burden of food security and agriculture. Yet, their roles are often ignored, they are denied land rights and yet forced to be the only ones worried about the food security of their children. Not just in Athukottai but across the state and the country, thousands of women farmers have realised that the best way to feed their children and family is to lease land together, grow hardy millets and stay away from men and a patriarchy-driven market. The Kudumbashree initiative by the Kerala state government, efforts by the Deccan Development Society in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana are all examples of women coming together to form collectives to make agriculture work for them.



Palaniammal and Jayalakshmi from Athukottai take a break for tender coconut grown in their fields. Karthikeyan Hemalatha

In Tamil Nadu, Dalit and landless women farmers in dryland areas of the state have formed groups of five to ten, to lease land and grow various kinds of crops; including pulses, vegetables, oil-seeds, and millets. "While policy-makers may say otherwise, here are women who actually want to do farming. And they have found new strength by forming collectives," said co-convenor of Alliance for Sustainable and Holistic Agriculture (ASHA) Kavita Kuruganthi.

Instead of farming for the market, women grow crops that feed them. "Our first priority is to grow food for ourselves. What is the point of buying food from the market and at a higher cost and sprayed with chemicals? We know our food is chemical-free and healthy," said Tamil Selvi, another farmer from Athukottai. Tamil Selvi and Jayalakshmi, each work on one acre of land that is registered in their husband's name. Though they have not come together as a collective officially, there is a sense of deep bonding where they take ownership of each other's happiness and struggles. Labour is exchanged, and food gets bartered. "Sometimes, when we have excess produce we like to sell it in the market. But going to the market either means depending on my husband to take me there or hire an expensive auto," said Valliammal. "I'd rather not," she added.

Tamil Nadu faced its worst droughts in 140 years in 2016-17. Coupled with demonetisation, crop procurement fell by nearly 85 percent, according to one report from *The Times of India*. During this time, women farmers are the ones who came on top. "It is not as though they did not have a difficult time. But farmlands run by women were in a far better position than those with men. Along with the free rice from ration shops, they complimented their meals with the various types of vegetables they grew, something men could not do," said the founder of the Tamil Nadu Women's Collective (TNWC) Sheelu Francis. "The fact that they are bringing resilient cropping in a rain-fed cropping system is precisely what Tamil Nadu has been grappling with and needs, especially in the last four-five years of crisis. The women are showing that the solutions are here," said Kuruganthi.

While one-third of the produce goes to the landowner, the rest goes to directly to the plates of their family. "Vegetables are often an expensive commodity. Tribals and those living in poverty are prone to malnutrition if there were to depend on the market for food. By growing their food, we are trying to move women away from a man-driven economy of cash crops and debts," said Francis.

Dharmapuri is known to be prone to communal clashes. In 2012, the district was up in riots when a Dalit youth married a woman from the Vanniyar caste. Several houses and hundreds of buses were ransacked and torched. In 2014, 19-year-old Illavarasan was found dead by railway tracks in Dharmapuri. Despite communal clashes amongst men, women have found ways to work together. Valliammal from Maraavadi, a hilly village just a few kilometres from Natham (Ilavarasan's hometown) works with seven other women, all belonging to different castes and classes. The village is rain-fed, and being on a rocky-terrain gives them little luxury to grow paddy or sugarcane. "This is the first time we are growing rice in three years. With no rains, the forests are drying up forcing pigs, rabbits, and peacocks to destroy our fields," said the 40-year-old. "Amongst us women, there is no difference in the work we do or the caste we come from. We eat together during breaks and understand each other's problems like our own," she added.

When women come together, it is not just about cropping or cropping patterns. "It is also a social approach to farming. You are doing it jointly without being competitive against each other. When women do farming, there is a communitarian ethos that they bring in. It does not affect your morale or push you into suicides," said Kuruganthi.



The Amudha Sirudhanya Mathippu Kootu Thozhil Kuzhu sources millets from local farmers and manufactures and sells millet-based snacks. Karthikeyan Hemalatha

The collective is working with 12,000 farmers across the state. Millets are not only hardy against the increasing temperatures and decreasing water availability, but are also nutritionally rich. "The idea is to neither depend on the market to sell our produce nor on one crop because if it fails, we lose everything. In our fields, we grow broad beans, red gram, veggies like brinjal, ladies finger, tomato as well as millets like ragi and finger millets," said Ranganayaki, a farmer and a staff of Tamil Nadu Women's Collective. Her job involves travelling to villages in Dharmapuri and Krishnagiri districts and help other women farmers set up collectives.

This agro-biodiversity maintained by women is what ensures food security for the entire family, sometimes even during the times of drought and mounting debts from men.

"Globally, there is empirical evidence that women have a decisive role in ensuring food security and preserving local agro-biodiversity. Rural women are responsible for the integrated management and use of diverse natural resources to meet the daily household needs," read the Ministry of Finance's latest economic survey.

Yet, only 12.8 percent of operational holdings were owned by women, reflecting a wide gender disparity. "As per Census 2011, out of total female main workers, 55 percent were agricultural labourers and 24 percent were cultivators. However, only 12.8 percent of the operational holdings were owned by women, which reflect the gender disparity in ownership of landholdings in agriculture," read the report. Between 2000-01 and 2010-11, the percentage of women with less than one hectare of land increased from 11.8 percent to just 13.6 percent. Overall, it increased 10.8 percent to 12.8 percent.

The lack of landholding reflects in women's representations in unions and their demands from the state government through protests. While men fight for loan waivers and minimum support price for their crops, women want millets to be introduced in ration shops and mid-day meals. The Tamizhaga Vivasayigal Sangam (Tamil Nadu Farmer's Union) is perhaps the biggest union in the state, with more than 50,000 enrolments. Yet, only around 3,000 of them are women. The president of the union does not hesitate for a second to agree that more than 90 percent of agriculture is managed by women. "We cannot farm like the way women farm. Where will we get the money for our other needs?" said the state president of the union SA Chinnasamy. "While there are a few districts that have separate unions for women. I don't see a future in which a woman can become head of a farming union," he added.

Women with a little more land than Jayalakshmi and Valliammal have higher aspirations. R Sangeetha, heads the Amudha Sirudhanya Mathippu Kootu Thozhil Kuzhu (Amudha Millets Collective) and works with 14 other women. Each of them has between 4-5 acres of land that they manage. With the help of Krishi Kendra Vigyan, the collective got a millet processor and an oven. The women grow millets and the collective produces various millet products like cookies, laddus, savorys and health mixes. The collective manages all aspects of the business — from growing the required crops to packaging and to marketing. "This area development only after women got together. They are the only ones with money. The men only have debts," said R Gobi, Sangeetha's husband who was more than happy to stay away from the limelight and the adulation that the collective receives. The collective buys millets in its raw form from its members at market price. "Right now, we are selling our products to nearby towns directly," said Sangeetha adding that the collective makes a monthly profit of Rs 20,000.



Women farmers from Athukottai village in Dharmapuri district. Karthikeyan Hemalatha

One way of empowering women is to give them more land. "Overall, Tamil Nadu has more female agriculture labourers than cultivators, compared to other states. Therefore their need to access to land is very real. Many Dalit women farmers have been saying that there is much land to be distributed. If the government gets serious about public land distributions, a lot of temple lands that can be given to these women," said Kuruganthi.

The Tamil Nadu Women's Collective was recognised by the US Food Sovereignty Alliance in 2013. Earlier in march, the All India Millet Sisters Network, of which TNWC is part of, won a presidential award on International Women's Day for their outstanding contribution to women's empowerment in the country. "By procuring millets, the state would be creating a market that would ensure sustainable farming, empower women and bring healthy meals to children and those depending on ration shops," said Francis.