

Women farmers and the changing farming landscape in Kerala





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Introduction

Women play an important role in agriculture and food systems worldwide and they constitute about 70 percent of agriculture workers (FAO). According to OXFAM (2017), 40 percent of women in the labour force rely on agriculture as their primary source of income. They are engaged in plantations, dairy farming, agro processing and packaging. Most women in the villages are engaged in activities like weeding, winnowing, transplanting etc in the family land. Apart from this women are involved in food processing traditionally. This used to reduce the food wastage and ensure food security in the off season. But women are side lined at the crucial levels of farming especially decision making, land ownership, access to government support systems etc. One can see that it has happened over the years of structural change in the agriculture system where technology, seeds and markets are controlled by external institutions and private players. This has actually disempowered women from farming families and their status have been reduced to unskilled mere agriculture workers.

During a study in Kottayam district among rubber planters we interviewed many women farmers. Many of them told us that the change from a homestead farming system to rubber has made a huge impact in their life. When they were having home stead they had everything, from food to fuel to medicine in that piece of land. They had all the freedom to choose and thus maintain the basic life of the family. Once rubber was introduced, over the years the land lost all the diversity because that was the policy and farmers could not keep the diversity. Women also told that for every single thing they had to start depending on men for cash because everything had to be bought from the market. Women were not directly involved in rubber trade.

Another major factor which contributed to loss of control over production by women is Green Revolution itself. In Kerala women were equally or more in charge of saving seeds even in the case of paddy production. Every household used to have a seed bank and women played a major role in seed selection to keeping the seeds for next season. Similar is the case with vegetables. Women had developed different methods of seed keeping without losing the quality and viability

of seeds. Since vegetable production was mostly meant for home consumption women were keen on saving all the diverse kinds of vegetables as well as had the habit of seed exploration. Home steads also helped women to choose local and seasonal food crops for families. Their knowledge base on food and health was so much so that it could take care of both food security and health of each family. They also developed a well founded food processing systems like drying, pickling, and preservation using salt and other spices. A study done in Thirunelly panchayath in Wayanad district showed that local women have a knowledge about 100 uncultivated edible plants which are naturally grown in the agriculture land, especially organic paddy lands.

Green revolution brought in the idea of HYVs by which farmers started to depend on the market for seeds. In the beginning the seeds were produced by agriculture research institutions and private agencies accredited by the agriculture department. Later small and big seed companies got in and they majorly control the seed market especially of vegetables, flowers and fruits. On one side it has made farming unviable and on the other side women lost a significant, skilled role in farming.

Revival of farming in Kerala by women

Kerala lost its culture of diversity based farming, including homestead farming, owing to proliferation of plantations of coconut, rubber, cocoa, coffee etc. One of the major impacts of this was on women who lost control over their food system as well as natural practices of health care. Women, despite owning lands, started to depend on markets for their food. This trend actually led the State and the families to food insecurity, in terms of quality and diversity.

It was in 2000 that I started to work in Vizhinjam and Venganoor panchayaths in Trivandrum district in Kerala as part of a study on use of pesticides in vegetable production. These two panchayaths have large number of lease land farmers who are the main vegetable suppliers to Chalai market in Trivandrum then. Most of the conventional farmers in these two panchayaths are men and depend on chemical inputs for producing vegetables, banana and tapioca which are the main crops cultivated by these farmers. Majority of the farmers were not sensitive to the issues of chemicals, soil health or long term

sustainability of agriculture. But I found out that women were very open and sensitive to the issues of pesticides and safety of food. Kerala as a state was discussing the issue of endosulfan and other toxic pesticides then.

Later in 2002 Thanal, (a voluntary environmental research organization based in Trivandrum) as part of its 'zero waste' work in Kovalam, got involved with local women groups. Women were organized as self help groups by the Kudumbasree Mission and panchayath, but were not doing any productive economic activity. Apart from earning through daily wage work, women were not at all thinking about sustainable livelihood options. After discussions with the panchayath, Thanal started several training programmes. This included training on coconut shell products, paper products, products from cloth discards, jute etc. However, two groups were interested in farming, especially vegetable production. But many of the women in these groups did not own land. To help these women, some leaders in the village met some land owners who had vacant land to spare and got formal agreements done to start vegetable cultivation. These lands were coconut gardens, basically monocultures, with lots of space in between. The soil was not good, water availability was low and the green manures or organic manures were not available.

The women were given training on biodiversity, organic management of soil and crops, crop protection using bio pesticides etc. In a year's time the coconut garden became a biodiverse garden with different vegetables, tubers and bananas. Women took care of the garden so well that even coconut production started increasing and the land owner was very happy to see this change. It was a great beginning and many other farmers and land owners started visiting these gardens to see the result.

Initially, the women farmers started to share their produce with their neighbours. Slowly, the production increased and some of them started selling the produce in the local market. However, the local markets were really de-motivating for women. They wanted a separate market for their produce, and consumers to appreciate their produce and buy them. Thus began organic bazaar, one of the first organic outlets in Thiruvananthapuram.

Sasikala, one of the leading woman farmer from Kovalam started organic vegetable cultivation 10 years back and she was earning Rs.5,00 per month. Now, she earns Rs 4000 per month by selling organic vegetables after the house hold consumption. She shares her experience of farming and healthy food with other farmers, friends and relatives. Also she shares traditional seeds. She also trains many in organic vegetable cultivation. There are many women like her now who are doing organic farming and generating



income. They either own small piece of land or they take land on lease and do sustainable farming using biodiversity. In Sasikala's opinion, "if we love and take care of plants, they will never cheat us and show their happiness in the form of fruits".

Women can lead and earn by taking care of land and biodiversity

Women in Kerala are now coming back to farming and food production. Most of them follow a low external input agriculture or simple locally adapted organic farming. They find a lot of advantages by doing this. They get poison-free food for home consumption. They can manage the cultivation without much external support, develop knowledge and share it. Also, they bring additional income. Women take pride in their new found knowledge and capacities. Some of them have become trainers too.

The organic farming trials with diverse crops and low external input in the above mentioned two panchayaths have become models, adopted in different parts of the State. Many panchayaths and agriculture department now support such



projects, especially with landless farmers and small and marginal farmers. Many farmer groups and organizations are getting interested in this ecosystem approach and have learnt how to enrich the agricultural biodiversity responsive to their food and nutrition needs. For organic manure, some of them have their own manure production using cow dung, poultry manure, vermi compost, wild plant manure, coir pith compost etc. For pest management, the women groups largely depend on bio inputs produced.

Urban kitchen gardens led by women are also developing fast in many towns and cities in Kerala. Some of them have even started weekly markets. They have social platforms through which seeds and knowledge are shared.

Studies and reports show that Kudumbasree women are doing an excellent job in farming by taking up land on lease. Many of them are doing organic farming and learning and innovating a lot. Some groups got motivated to take up processing of their produce and to sell value added products. There are many examples across the state.

Collective power of women groups, integration of local self governments, and pro active credit schemes have enabled landless women to emerge as commercial farmers in Kerala. A large number of women are gaining identity as 'farmers' under these women collectives.

The Alamkode and Thennala panchayaths have demonstrated their innovative leadership by collecting the paddy produced by the women groups, getting it milled at local rice mills, and selling under their own brand names- Thennala rice and Puthari Organic Rice of Alamkode. The banking agencies, who were reluctant to provide any loan support to women in the past, are now rating these women groups as most credit worthy according!

Another important role which they play is taking care of our paddy ecosystem by doing fallow land cultivation. In the last 10 years these women have revived thousands of acres of paddy land which were lying fallow to a productive farming system. In that sense they are not only producing food for the state, but conserving water and wetlands too