



Women Farmers in Kudumbashree Program: Gendered Ownership and Control over Productive Resources

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ABSTRACT: Women in India play a crucial role in agriculture, and their work ranging from crop production to post-harvesting. They work as cultivators, paid agricultural labourers or sometimes work in their family land as unpaid workers. Even if women contribute to farming, literature shows that they lack resources, including access, control and ownership of the productive resources for doing farming. The Kudumbashree collective farming programme through long-term leasing of land is an initiative through which it is premised that women's collective bargaining increases and improves their control over productive resources. Using Naila Kabeer's framework of Social Relations, this article examines how the Kudumbashree programmes impact women farmers' access, control and ownership of productive resources. It analyses the programme's potential for women farmers' empowerment and the transformation of gender relations using Kabeer's framework.

Keywords: women farmers, collective farming, kudumbashree



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In a predominantly agricultural economy like India, women played a crucial role in agriculture, from seeding to post-harvesting. Traditionally women play various agricultural roles as farmers, co-farmers, family labourers, wage labourers and farm managers (Krishnaraj 2008). They manage mixed agricultural practices with their work ranging from crop production to livestock production for survival and commercial enterprise. According to the statistical profile on women's labour published by the Labour Bureau, Ministry of Labour & Employment (2014) at the national level, 24.64% percent of women are cultivators, and 29.96% are agricultural labourers. Among female workers, agricultural labourers constituted a major proportion, i.e. 55.21 percent of total workers (Bureau 2014).

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The women work as cultivators, paid agricultural labourers or sometimes work in their family land as unpaid workers. Often, working in their family-owned land, their work will be considered an extension of their roles of caregiving, home maintenance, livestock rearing and child-rearing. In effect, women work for long hours and a large part of it is not counted as paid work or recognized as contributing to the economy at large. Since women working on farms are seen as add-on workers to men, they are not asset owners. Due to this lack of ownership, research shows (Agarwal 2003; Kelkar 2011) that women farmers face problems with access, control and ownership over productive inputs like land, agricultural extension services, credit facilities, knowledge, technology and infrastructure. The lack of recognition of their contribution to agriculture, their knowledge and skills of agricultural practices leads to gender disparity in access to and control over resources, which hinders their identity as farmers.

Women Farmers and Agriculture in India

A working paper prepared by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO 2011) brings out the gender differences in control over assets worldwide. The paper highlights how time use surveys bring out the labour burden of women and how it is different for developing and developed countries and varies across regions and social class. A large part of their work is not recognized as 'economic activity' and is unpaid work. This is further complicated by understanding a household/family where men have ownership rights over most productive resources. Hence, women find it difficult to access credit facilities due to a lack of assets. Deere (2006) and Doss (2006) state that due to the gender asset gap and in most countries, women form a high proportion of the poor, and there is a need to address the gender issues related to assets and poverty (Deere 2006). The agricultural productivity depends on productive resources such as land, modern inputs, technology, education, and financial services, but female farmers have less access to these productive resources, hence reducing women's agricultural productivity (FAO 2011). According to Kelkar (2011), the gendered distribution of assets negatively affects the efforts to beat poverty.

The women's independent right to own and control land and other assets can change the structure of patriarchy within the family system and in social relations. Referring to the researches (Shapiro and Wolff 2001; Bhatla et al. 2006; Kelkar 2007a, b; World Bank 2008), Kelkar (2011) shows the positive correlation between women's ownership of specific assets and reduced vulnerability to experiencing access to productivity-increasing technologies. Land ownership, along

with access to institutional credit, control of seeds, crop management, and training and extension services, help manage women farmers' lives and increase their productivity in the agricultural sector. She also discusses the feminization of agricultural labour in the Asian context and the fact that women have poorer access, control and ownership to productive assets like land, public services, new technology, extension services and credit facilities compared to men (Kelkar 2011). The mainstream economic theory views the household as the unitary entity or a '*space of harmony*' and assumes that there are a pooling and sharing of all resources and inputs. But a necessary condition for equitable distribution of income to all members will depend on the bargaining power of each of the members (Agarwal 2003).

Agarwal (1994) emphasizes that control and ownership of property go hand in hand, and property advantages stem from ownership and effective control over it. In most societies, today it is men who largely control wealth-generating property, that is, farmland. According to Agarwal (1994), the gender gap in the ownership and control of the property is the single most critical contributor to the gender gaps in economic wellbeing, social status and empowerment. In primarily rural economies such as those of South Asia, the most important property in question is arable land (Agarwal 1994). The sense of empowerment associated with land rights boosts women's ability to assert themselves within homes, in the community and with the state. There are three major ways -inheritance, state transfers and market- through which women can gain land. She has also discussed that the obstacles to women's access to land are inheritance laws, social bias and administrative bias (Agarwal 2002). Agarwal (2018) argues that food security and farm inputs depend on women farmers as the number of women agricultural workers is growing worldwide. Their productivity is reduced due to their limited access to land and other productive inputs. Swasti Pachauri (2019) feels that the most important issue that needs to be addressed is to minimize the gap between ownership and control over land for achieving gender equality. Pachauri (2019) highlights that the absence of land rights denies the landless women and female agricultural labourers of their 'access to credit, insurance, irrigation and other entitlements related to agricultural schemes.

Agarwal (2003) critically emphasized that women's and children's poverty depend on women's access to income and resources, and land ownership can enhance their self-confidence and avail better government benefits. Land ownership will help the women farmers empower and be assertive to access extension services and other inputs (Agarwal 2003). Behera and Behera (2013) also pointed out that the lack of land ownership for women farmers is a handicap.

Kelkar (2007) mentions that access to resources by women farmers is important and that it is crucial to expose them to the process of change through education in the use of technology. Samanta (1994) pointed out that agricultural extension services do not give much importance to women farmers. Behera and Charan (2013) state that obstacles of lack of extension services, storage, and technical assistance prevent women farmers from adopting new technologies. There is a need to have trained women farmers in extension programmes at the grass-root level to contribute more to this field.

Women's Livelihoods and Land Rights

Chambers (1995) defined livelihood as a living, with people, tangible assets and intangible assets contributing to it. The tangible assets commanded by a household are stores such as food stocks, stores of value such as gold, jewelry and woven textiles, and cash savings in thrift banks and credit schemes; and resources such as land, water, trees, livestock, farm equipment, tools and domestic utensils. The intangible assets are claims which can be made for material, moral or other practical support and access, meaning the opportunity in practice to use a resource, store or service, or to obtain information, material, technology, employment, food or income and livelihood capabilities' including coping abilities, opportunities and sundry freedoms (Chambers 1995).

Sumi Krishna (2007) has discussed how women do not own or control resource bases. So, there have been group struggles and diverse pressures in fighting for their rights on livelihoods, work, and cultural environments. She also emphasized the importance of women's access to land and other resources will enhance women's power to decide within the family. She concluded by saying that there is a need to recast citizenship by altering the patriarchal system for a 'gender-just' development, and that will ensure women's livelihood rights (Krishna 2007). Krishna (2004) argues that it is important to consider the right of ownership of resources and its control and management. She critically analyzed that it is difficult to change the family's power relations than create women's rights in community spaces. Women have a subordinate role in productive activities and are denied rights over their labour-power. Women's activities are considered supportive.

With more than 40% of women in agriculture working as agricultural workers in India, it becomes even more imperative to explore whether there has been an increase in the access and control over productive resources through state interventions. This is even more crucial as they manage complex tasks at household and livelihoods generation, including all caregiving and household maintenance tasks, livestock rearing, vegetable gardens for self-consumption, and

continuous agricultural work in small and medium farms owned by others or by their families.

Agarwal (2010) espouses the need to promote collective farming as the agrarian sector has been declining. She explains this by looking at NSSO (2004-5) data and revealing that most men have moved to non-farm sectors, but the same is not the case for women. She points out that almost 83% of rural women workers are engaged in agriculture. An estimated 38% of women live in female-headed households due to widowhood, marital breakdown, or male outmigration (GOI 1988). This has deep implications for poverty alleviation programmes as unless women are centerstage to policy interventions, most programmes may not achieve their targets. Besides, landholdings sizes are also reducing with 70% operating on less than 1ha in 2003 as compared to 56% in 1982 (GOI 2008).

Coupled with this is the nature of intra-household inequalities that exist in most societies. On the one hand, women are in underpaid and low wage jobs, most of the rural agricultural work they do are approached as an extension of their household activities and on the other within the household, their workload is unequal heavily skewed towards them as 'women.' This reduces their capacity to negotiate and bargain within the household any demands for access to productive resources, education, new knowledge and new skills. According to Doss & Miruka (2014), women's property rights will improve bargaining power and improved decision making in the household. Similarly, Suryanarayana and Nagalakshmi (2005), discussing women's decision-making status, argue that the low level of education contributes to subordinate their status. Education and economic incentives can free women. They can improve their status as other household members feel that women are contributing to family income, which can improve their bargaining power (Sharma 2014). Ghosh (2015) shares that it is also a policy matter and that the basic amenities need to be ensured for women's wellbeing, and there is a need for fundamental change in the mindset of policymakers to such issues.

Collective Farming for Empowerment of Women

There have been several initiatives in India to focus on empowering poor women through collective mobilization. Initiatives like SEWA, and Working Women's Forum, have worked successfully with poor women collectivizing them around diverse livelihoods in Gujarat and Tamil Nadu. Another outstanding effort has been that of Deccan Development Society (DDS), Medak District of Andhra Pradesh, wherein Dalit women have been organized to lease land from upper caste landlords to cultivate organic crops. Using their traditional knowledge of seeds and inputs, the women farmers have been given easy loans to cultivate the lands by DDS and promote

sustainable agriculture. For poor women, collectives work better for organizing livelihoods as they work on each other's lands in groups. It succeeds in increasing their bargaining and negotiating capacities, which in turn enables their empowerment. However, does it also increase their control over assets, access to productive resources required for farming and increase their 'voice' within households for decision making is a crucial element that needs to be further explored.

According to the report by the Committee on Doubling Farmers Income (2017, pp 91-94), farmers can register for online services only if they have land. Therefore women cannot access the services since they do not have land in their name but are working in their family land or lease land. These women's constraints extend to access to resources like land, credit, training, extension, and marketing facilities. The report highlights that women do not have access to land or secure tenure over land, which hampers their productivity. Often, the land they cultivate on lease is less productive than those allocated to men due to gender bias and lack of negotiating capacities, which again reduces their productivity. Besides, inheritance laws and customary laws also prevent women from owning land. This gender bias requires strategies that address the everyday practical needs of poor women and work towards addressing their strategic needs by increasing their control over productive assets. There have been several collective farming experiences, and these need to be explored to analyze if women's access and control over productive resources have been enhanced through these efforts. Further, does this access transform gender relations and lead to gender equality and women's empowerment is a major issue that needs to be explored with regard to these interventions.

One of the most popular and successful programmes that has time and again been highlighted is the collective farming initiative undertaken by the government of Kerala, India, through the Kudumbashree programme. This paper will now go on to explore this programme and see the ways in which women engaged in collective farming.

Kudumbashree and Collective Farming by Women

In Kerala, the people's plan movement and campaign, the decentralization process 1996-7 by the government has led to establishing effective institutional structure from the local to the state levels. The decentralization aspects were not just limited to administrative but also financial, wherein almost 40% of the state budgets went straight to local governance institutions together with political powers of decision making. The gender component of these processes was consciously thought about, and the Kudumbashree programme of the Kerala government evolved as a State Poverty Eradication Mission (SPEM) and now has evolved as a women empowerment

programme. One of the major programmes of Kudumbashree is the promotion of collective farming among women. The understanding is that collective farming can improve women's access to land and other productive resources through collective bargaining and work to give visibility to farming as a livelihood activity. While promoting farming to ensure food security among poor households is a major objective of this programme, it is also crucial to highlight that the focus is on alleviating families' poverty and not 'empower' women. Hence the interventions are directed towards improving livelihoods based on agriculture.

For agriculture to be sustainable instead of small landholdings, pooling of land ensures better yields and thereby ensures profits for households. With this as a key idea, the Kudumbashree programme initiated collective farming with women in Kerala. Women are given lands on group lease to start production in fallow agricultural lands and cultivable wastelands with credit facilities (Kudumbashree 2017). Kudumbashree as a poverty alleviation programme follows a convergence model wherein it has a multiplicity of approach which ensures institutional structures from local to state. It ensures the linkages of all state-led programmes with the local governance systems on the one hand and on the other promote women's thrift societies and micro-credit/enterprises at the local, district and state levels through federations. The women interested in collective farming can form a Joint Liability Group (JLG) at the grass-root level and can access agricultural credit from the banking system. They utilize land under three categories, own land, land on lease or government land. The programme supports women engaged in farming activities by providing capacity building training programmes and other technical inputs. The other agricultural line departments are also working with Kudumbashree to ensure good agricultural practices. This initiative enables women in agricultural activities to be 'effective producers' through their collective efforts (Pammi 2014). The Kudumbashree, through collective farming, enhances the access, control and ownership to productive assets through collective bargaining and the key learning points of collective bargaining were later adopted by Mahila Kisan Sashaktikaran Pariyojana scheme of Central Government (Dand 2014).

A case study conducted by Anand and Maskara (2014) discusses the programme's challenges, among which the major challenge is land. The women falling in the Below Poverty Line category mainly belonging to scheduled tribes, scheduled caste, and minorities, could not depend on cultivating their land because the land was not sufficient enough (Anand 2014). According to Kelkar (2011), leasing the land as a group helps women bargain and negotiate effectively in the lease market. Bina Agarwal (2003) is another feminist economist who discusses the implications of

collective farming. Collective farming can address resource constraints through a group approach and will help pool the resources and skills and get better market access than the individual basis. When they take land on lease and work in a group, it improves their trust and solidarity and better tackles the problems. This increases their collective bargaining in the rural market (Agarwal 2003). Sajesh V (2013) pointed out that collective farming improved aspects like land, inputs and credit. The women groups could access land on lease with the help of Kudumbashree Mission, and Kudumbashree subsidy and loan was availed from nationalized, and some of the privatized banks solved the issue of credit, and that helped them to access inputs. The groups' bargaining power improved through collective farming, and groups having the higher group dynamic effects are more effective in terms of resources, technology, extension, marketing, and capacity building (Sajesh V 2013). Geethakutty (n.d.) explains that collective farming helps women access inputs and resources, thereby enabling them to be recognized as farmers. More than 2.8 lakh women members of lower economic groups are taking up farming in fallow land, and in some places, they even formed 'land banks' to ensure the availability of land on lease and take the initiative to conduct awareness classes for landowners to convince them (Geethakutty nd).

According to Munshi (2017), Self Help Groups help close the gender gap in the agricultural sector. She emphasizes providing women with an identity and knowledge about the technical and financial aspects of agriculture and direct access to information on various aspects (Munshi 2017). Rohin Kumar (2018) said that we do not have gender-neutral credit facilities because of the fact that women do not have access to collaterals to meet the loan requirements.

Kudumbashree and Empowerment of Women Farmers

While most of the research has highlighted the efficacy of collectives and women's involvement in these enable them to tackle economic hardships at the household levels, what emerges is a narrative of poor women as economic agents contributing to the household and state's development. The status thus being accorded to women as they are also imbuing economic assets as natural. Women do not critique the unpaid household labour that is gendered in nature and continue to perform them without questioning or complaining about them. Burdening of their work does not allow for collective conversations on their rights, health issues, violence faced in households or possible way out from them. Thus, women's depoliticization and their concerns become complete when such programmatic interventions are not accompanied by interventions on legal rights, gender, body, sexuality and violence issues. The lack of leisure and spaces for collective conversations deny them the opportunity to develop their inherent collective

consciousness and ability to negotiate patriarchal rules and cultural norms of gendered behaviour. The state is not a neutral entity, as it is the state actors (bureaucracy, officials and functionaries) who develop the interventions, which, as in Kudumbashree, tend to locate women within the families and then envisage programmes. As discussed by Kabeer (1994), social relations and the power play within a society percolate to institutions like family, community, state and market. All actors within these institutions are guided by their location within the society and marked by their gender and gender roles. Therefore, often programmes conceptualized by the state, even NGOs and women participants overlook this dynamic and power relationships. In doing so, often, the women's subordination within the households is neither acknowledged nor addressed. Which brings the question of the use of the concept of women's empowerment? Does a programme take away the 'power' from empowerment programmes, or it actively seeks to transform gender relations and make all institutions, i.e., family, community, state and market gender equal? Women can be considered to be 'empowered' only when they can challenge the ideologies that justify social inequalities, become capable of accessing and have control over economic, natural and intellectual resources, and there is a gender-equal transformation of institutions and structures that sustain existing power (Batiwala 2007).

Similarly, Kabeer (1994) defines empowerment as a transformative process that challenges patriarchy and other social structures based on class, caste, and ethnicity. Empowerment should be the capability to challenge, question and change these structures. Kabeer explains empowerment as 'the expansion in people's ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to them' (Kabeer 2001). She conceptualizes empowerment in terms of changes in three inter-related domains: resources, which form the conditions under which choices are made, agency or the ability to make choices and the agency to define one's goals and act towards achieving them, and achievements which are the outcomes of choices.

In an interesting analysis, Devika and Thampi (2007) acknowledge that the Kudumbashree programme has enabled women's access to credit, promoted savings, and steadily ensured wage labour available throughout the year. Simultaneously, the linkages to panchayats and their sense of self as economic assets for the family have served as an instant 'cultural upward mobility' with improved capabilities and confidence among women (Devika J 2007). However, Devika and Thampi (2007) also raise a pertinent point that the programme continues to affirm their identities as 'self-sacrificing but income-generating women of the family' which does not change or

transform the gender relations within the household and is also in many ways reaffirmed by the programme as it keeps the wellbeing of the 'family' at the center and does not focus on the power relations and hierarchies that exist within the society, community and family.

Considering that men are moving out of farming into non-farm activities and migrating to urban centers for better wages, policymakers are now agreeing that women play a significant role in the field of farming. Therefore, to improve agricultural outcomes and enhance families' food security, increasingly, women are being recognized as the key players, and they are therefore engaged to perform almost all activities in the field. But it is also true that to perform these activities in the field, they lack resources like land, access to extension services, market etc. Talking in terms of empowerment of women farmers, they cannot enhance their productivity in farming without the rights of these resources. This gender gap in the resources will hinder women's role as a 'farmer.' There are lots of initiatives aiming for women to have access to productive resources to take up farming. But way more to go to ensure that women farmers enjoy equal rights over resources, especially land. Agarwal (2003), in an in-depth analysis, has shown how even if women have a small piece of land that they may not necessarily use for farm activities, their security enables them to make decisions regarding their lives and livelihoods. She uses the Deccan Development Society (DDS), Andhra Pradesh as an example to highlight how the initiative for collective farming was started with both men and women. Still, due to corruption and infighting, the DDS decided to shift their attention to women's groups only (Agarwal, 2003, pp 207). The DDS experience of group lease for women for collective farming has also been supported by inputs and interest-free loans to lease land to the poorest and marginalized groups of women. Since 1994, DDS has also been supporting land purchases by groups of women taking advantage of a scheme initiated by the Scheduled Caste Development Corporation (SCDC) of the state of Andhra Pradesh (Agarwal 2003, pp 208). This enhances the women's confidence to handle any adversity, and single women (by choice, divorced, separated or widowed) have an opportunity to make a living without depending on male relatives within the families.

Conclusion

Collective farming is one major initiative by Kudumbashree wherein, through Self Help Groups, women get into farming by being given lands on lease. Kudumbashree's approach of convergence with all other development activities from the local to the state through NHGs (Neighbourhood groups, Panchayats and State missions like SRLM) enables access information, inputs, credit facilities and mobility for poor women to enhance their livelihoods through farming

activities. However, does this programmatic approach, which focuses on the family's wellbeing as an outcome, locate the gender power dynamics within and outside households and does it also locate the tensions and connections of gender with local social groups is a matter of further analysis. Kudumbashree can be seen as a programme that ensures women's access to productive resources, assets, and inputs to enhance farming outputs and ensure food security of the households. Perhaps to make it a truly empowering process would require enhanced interventions on legal rights, feminist education and mobilization of women around their rights. Empowerment has to be understood in the ways in which Kudumbashree women are initiating changes within society and family, making gender-egalitarian changes concerning gender roles and improved women's participation in decision-making and distribution of resources within the families. Doing this requires an institutional introspection and shift by the policymakers at all levels where the Kudumbashree programme is not relegated simply to livelihood generation but as gender transformative and rights based intervention. To do this, it is important to ensure that women farmers are provided with a discursive space where they can discuss and dialogue on their everyday issues, know their rights, and suggest and represent their needs at policy levels.

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