



# Women empowerment through co

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The National Agricultural Policy of India (2000) has highlighted the need for incorporating gender issues into the agricultural development agenda to provide recognition of women's role as farmers and producers of crops and livestock, users of technology, active agents in marketing, processing and storage of food and agricultural labourers. Access to credit and opportunities for employment, enterprise development and income generation opportunities have to be improved to make sustainable improvements in the livelihood of rural women. Performance evaluation reports reveal that women in agriculture programmes implemented have made impact in terms of improving access to information on agricultural technology, adoption of technology and gaining benefits from their use. Rural women have been facilitated through various programmes to form self help groups to take up agro-based micro-enterprises for income and employment generation.

Coconut is unique among horticultural crops in India and assumes considerable significance in the national economy in view of rural employment and income generation. India produced 15730 million coconuts in the year 2009 from an area of 1.94 million hectares with a productivity of 8303 nuts per hectare. Coconut industry provides livelihood to about ten million people in India. The traditional coconut industries which supports thousands of rural poor by providing employment and income are copra making, oil milling, coir making and to a certain extent desiccated coconut industry. Production and marketing of diversified high-value coconut products from all parts of coconut-the kernel, husk, shell, wood, water and leaves; are a potential source of income and employment for the rural women. The coir sector in India is very diverse and involves households, co-operatives, NGOs, manufacturers and exporters. The coir industry employs more than 6.4 lakh persons of whom a majority is from rural areas

belonging to the economically weaker sections of society. Nearly 80% of the coir workers in the fibre extraction and spinning sectors are women. The coir industry in Kerala state alone provides employment to around 4 lakh persons of which 3.25 lakh are women.

The documentation of outputs of the COGENT sponsored project on 'Developing sustainable coconut based income generating technologies in poor rural communities' revealed that women members of the Community Based Organisations under the project increased their income upto 5 times through the production and marketing of coconut high value products compared to their previous income from copra. This project intervention provided employment opportunities to formerly unemployed and under employed rural women resulting in enhanced self esteem, and economic social empowerment.

The analysis of units supported by Kudumbasree Mission, the



*The members of the compost unit*

State Poverty Alleviation Project in Kerala, revealed that in general micro enterprises on copra and coconut oil, shell charcoal, toilet soap, washing soap, coconut based food products, coir yarn spinning, virgin coconut oil etc. are the major types of enterprises. 'Kerasree' units by the women's self help groups for the production and marketing of coconut oil ranked first with respect to the number of coconut based micro-enterprises. 'Friends of Coconut Trees', the innovative coconut palm climbing training programme being implemented by Coconut Development Board, also provided opportunity for unemployed young rural women to realize a better income and livelihood. Out of the 5576 trainees so far trained successfully under the programme, 390 are women.

Apart from the SHGs under Kudumbasree project, women's groups organized under some special projects by other agencies also run coconut based micro-enterprises in Kerala. The success story of SUBICSHA (Sustainable Business Development of Innovative Coconut Based Microenterprises for Holistic Growth and Poverty Alleviation), a special project under SGSY implemented by Perambra block panchayat in Kozhikode District in Kerala state since 2003 stands out

among such units. SUBICSHA, at present functioning as a registered company, is a federation of 700 women Self Help Groups (SHGs) with a total of 7000 members involved in various activities related to production and marketing of coconut products. About 41 value added coconut products are being produced and marketed by SUBICSHA. This unique company has an annual turn over of Rs.43.75 crores through coconut based micro enterprises with annual net sale revenue of Rs. 16.68 crores expecting a per family income of Rs. 25140 per annum.

The scenario analyses of

women self help groups in Kerala dealing with the coconut based micro-enterprises revealed that majority of the micro enterprises were started from the year 2002 onwards. On an average, there were eight members in each of the coconut based micro enterprise activity group. Majority of the members belonged to the age group of 35-45 years. 98% of the members were literate and 40% of them had education up to 10th standard. Kudumbasree, the State Poverty Alleviation Project and SUBICSHA were the important sources of information about the potential of coconut based micro enterprises. CPCRI, Coconut Development Board and Kudumbasree were the important agencies that provided training for the women SHGs on coconut based micro enterprises. Majority of the units availed credit facilities for starting the micro enterprises. Local Self Governments, Kudumbasree project and Coconut Development Board provided subsidies/incentives to the SHGs.



*Collecting the compost*

## Success story of a women SHG initiative on managing a microenterprise related to production and marketing of coir pith compost

'Gramajyothi, Kavilumpara, Kozhikode is a women self help group started in the year 1999 with seven active members. They got the awareness about the potential of such a business unit from Coir Board of India and were encouraged by the Gram Panchayat officials and the agricultural extension officials. Subsequently, they were motivated and got trained themselves from a campus training programme organized by STED and Coir Board at Nellikkunnu. The initial investment for the unit was around Rs. 3.1 lacs which include the infrastructural facilities and equipment costs. Out of the total initial cost they could garner Rs. 2 lacs from Block Panchayat and rupees fifty thousand from Gram Panchayat as support grant. Coir pith for the compost preparation is being collected from the coconut defibering unit at Kaiveli. The production cycle of enriched coir pith compost takes about 45-50 days. To enrich the coir pith compost, bone meal (20%), neem cake (10 %) and Rajphos (10 %) are also mixed with the coir pith. In one production cycle, about 14 tonnes of compost is produced. The product is sold

under the brand name 'Suraksha' at the selling price of Rs. 12 per kg. The cost of production per kg comes to about Rs. 9/-. Last year they could sell their product worth Rs. 16 lakhs. On an average, each member could earn Rs. 200/- per day through the microenterprise. The marketing of the product has been done through different agencies like SCB depot, Krishi Bahvan (under the decentralized planning schemes of local self governments) and also through direct selling in towns. Lack of storage facility and problems in procuring fungal culture were the major constraints faced by the unit. On the contrary, the members were extremely happy that the economic benefit in terms of profit share up to Rs. 30,000 per year accrued to each member besides their wage earnings. The members felt improvement in their self confidence and decision making power at home. They have also reflected the empowerment in terms of better self esteem, social interactions and better communication skills. The SHG has been successfully managing the micro-enterprise for the past 13 years and Mrs. Kashika Preman is the present convener of the group.

Initial investment required for starting the coconut based micro enterprise was highest for virgin coconut oil. Benefits of the units as perceived by the members of SHGs were i) economic empowerment ii) better self-esteem, self confidence and influencing power within the household, and iii) better social interactions and communication skills. The women entrepreneurs perceived that difficulty in marketing of the products was the most important constraint in running the coconut based micro enterprises.

We may assertively conclude that the coconut based micro-enterprises run by women SHGs have certainly resulted in empowerment of women



*Packed compost*

associated with the enterprises. Apart from the economic betterment, which being an easily understandable indicator of the

positive impact of the SHGs, there are certain other facts also to be recounted. This includes the dimension of motivation, aspiration, overcoming the fear of authority, confidence in one's own abilities, autonomy in the use of resources in house holds and participation in decision making in the house holds. However, to make the coconut based micro-enterprises sustainable, womens' access to technologies, sources of credit, skills for establishing enterprises etc should have to be improved. Workings through women groups and in partnership with other organisations having wider skills related to empowerment of women are also important.

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