

Original Research Article

Challenges faced by women collectives in lease land farming in Thrissur district, Kerala state

ABSTRACT

Lease land farming by women collective is an initiative introduced by *Kudumbashree* to encourage cultivation among self help groups. It not only contributes to significant changes in the lives of the women farmers but also helps to increase agricultural production by bringing fallow and cultivable waste land into agricultural use. The present study was conducted in Thrissur district during June to August 2022. Ex post facto research design was used. Two blocks, Kodakara and Ollukkara, representing more area under banana and vegetable lease land cultivation respectively were selected. From these blocks, two panchayats each were randomly selected. From Kodakara block, Mattathur and Kodakara, whereas from Ollukkara block, Nadathara and Puthur panchayats respectively. From these two panchayats, fifteen women joint liability groups were selected randomly, comprising 60 women farmers each who cultivate vegetables and banana under leased land. Thus, the total sample comprised of 120 women farmers. The data were collected with the help of semi structured pre tested interview schedule. Garrett ranking was employed to explore the challenges faced by women collective farmers. The challenges were categorised under four categories ie, lease land related, group related, technical and supplies and services. Among lease land related challenges, the non legalized status of leasing was ranked as the most serious one where the mean score was 63.10. Absenteeism of members ranked first accounting for a mean score of 61.29, with respect to group related challenges. Improper maintenance of records on farm expenses (68.63) and price fluctuations (78.7) were ranked first under technical and supply challenges respectively.

Keywords: *Challenges; Lease land farming,; Women collectives; Banana and Vegetable growers*

1. INTRODUCTION

Land is considered as the most valuable fixed asset in all economies and more so in agrarian and developing economies like India where it holds a symbol of both status and sustenance. The average size of operational land holding in India has been reduced very drastically over the years from 2.28 Ha in the 1970-71 to 1.08 Ha in 2015-16 [1]. The scenario in Kerala is also similar and average operational landholding is around 0.18 Ha [2]. The land crisis in the agrarian sector is leading to an increase in the number of small and marginal farmers. Despite the fact that we cannot "create more land," we can manage our existing land in a way that enables it to "become" a sustainable resource for future generations. In this scenario, accessibility of rural poor to land is becoming increasingly crucial for their livelihood. Since the poor cannot afford to buy land in the open market, the two main methods by which they can obtain land are through leasing and government access. In Kerala, leasing of land is permitted for members of SHGs for improving the livelihood and earnings of the farm families [3].

In Kerala State, collective farming emerged as a response to the paradoxical situation of heavy dependence on neighbouring states for food commodities, even though large areas of cultivable land in the state were kept idle due to waning interest in agriculture. On the other hand, many poor households willing to pursue agriculture as a source of livelihood did not have enough land to do so. For tackling the challenge of food security in the state, more community-focused efforts are required besides technological interventions. *Kudumbashree* initiated collective farming by organizing women to farm on leased property. Collective farming helps women to gain economic empowerment while assisting local governments in their efforts to achieve food security. Cultivation of fallow land is carried out by Joint Liability Groups (JLGs) formed as per the group model supported by the National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD) with the assistance of panchayats and the *Kudumbashree* community network [4].

In this background, the study was conducted to explore the major challenges faced by women collectives in lease land farming.

2. METHODOLOGY

The study was carried out in Thrissur district of Kerala state. Ex post facto research design was used. Two blocks, Kodakara and Ollukkara, representing more area under banana and vegetable lease land cultivation respectively were randomly selected. From these blocks, two panchayats each were randomly selected. From Kodakara block, Mattathur and Kodakara, whereas from Ollukkara block, Nadathara and Puthur panchayats respectively. From these two panchayats, fifteen women joint liability groups were selected randomly, comprising 60 women farmers each who cultivate vegetables and banana under leased land. Thus, the total sample comprised of 120 women farmers. Primary data were collected from the women farmers particularly engaged in lease land collective farming in the area. Semi structured pretested interview schedule was used. Farmers were asked to rank the problems faced by them based on their experiences. Garrett's Ranking Technique was employed to study the preference of challenges by converting to numerical scores. The prime advantage of this technique over simple frequency distribution is that the challenges are arranged based on their severity from the point of view of respondents. Hence, the same number of respondents on two or more challenges might have given different rank.

The rankings of the challenges assigned by the farmers were converted into percent position by using the following formula.

$$\text{Per cent position} = 100 (R_{ij} - 0.50) / N_j$$

Where,

R_{ij} = Rank given for i^{th} item by j^{th} individual farmer

N_j = Number of items ranked by j^{th} individual farmer

By using the Garrett table provided by [5], the percent position of each rank so derived was transformed into scores. The scores of each respondent were added up for each set of challenges and divided by the total number of respondents whose scores were added. The ranking was provided as the first rank to the most significant challenge and so on. These mean scores for all of these factors were placed in descending order.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 The challenges faced by women collective farmers

The challenges were divided into categories under four dimensions like lease land related, group related challenges, technical challenges and challenges related to supplies and services.

The farmers' responses regarding challenges related to lease land were recorded and the results are presented in the form of mean score with rank in Table 1. The ranking on preferential order indicates the primary concerns of the farmers. The results indicate that farmers were experiencing the non-legalized status of lease land cultivation as the major problem and ranked it as first. The tenancy is banned in Kerala for long but the state has recently permitted only self-help groups to lease land [6].

Poor fertility status of leased in land was ranked as second. According to the women farmers, the continuous cultivation of fertiliser intensive crops like bananas on leased property might have contributed to the degradation of soil fertility. To increase output, the JLG members were compelled to use more chemical fertilisers.

The high leasing rates were yet another significant obstacle mentioned by women farmers. Changing fallow to cultivable land involves significant costs and challenges. The lease period was too short, and many people believed that the landowners were "wary" of leasing continuously to the same groups. As a result, they frequently took the land back after a few seasons under the guise of "self/own" cultivation. The "wariness" was brought on by historical factors, especially the Kerala Land Reforms(Amendment) Act (KLRA) 1969, which gave cultivated tenants "ownership rights." The only instances in which groups were able to maintain a lease on the same piece of land were those in which they had formed "strong personal relationships" with the landowners. The initial land preparation required many weeks, and sometimes months, of toiling labour from JLG members, especially if the land had laid fallow for years. This made the short lease term of around three years unfair [7]. The above mentioned obstacles was given third rank by the respondents.

Lessors' unreliable approach towards previous agreements was ranked in fourth position. Al though lessee were having an agreement with the lessors, the unreliability of lessors is posing a great threat to women farmers.

Lack of willingness of some landowners to give their fallow land for cultivation to women collectives, lack of proper irrigation facilities in leased in land, little interest of some lessors to invest in land improvement, disputes between lessor and lessee due to land document issues were the other challenges felt by the women farmers

Table 1. Lease land related challenges

(N=120)

Sl.No	Challenges	Mean Score	Rank
1	Lack of willingness of some landowners to give their fallow land for cultivation to women collectives	50.28	V
2	Disputes between lessor and lessee due to land document issues	30.11	VIII
3	Non-legalized status of leasing of land	63.10	I
4	Lack of proper irrigation facilities in leased in land	44.83	VI
5	Little interest of some lessors to invest in land improvement	38.36	VII
6	Poor fertility status of leased in land	56.09	II
7	Lessors' unreliable approach towards previous agreements	53.37	IV
8	High lease land rent and short lease period	55.52	III

From the results presented in the Table 2. the absenteeism of some group members was ranked first by women farmers. Irregularity in conducting group meetings was ranked second. Lack of willingness few group members to take up leadership roles was another major concern. The other challenges were reluctance of some group members to attend trainings and workshops and lack of sufficient time due to domestic workload of women.

Similar results were obtained in the study among the tribal women self-help groups of Vansda taluka in Gujarat [8]

Table 2. Group Related challenges (N=120)

SI.No	Challenges	Mean Score	Rank
1	Irregularity in conducting group meetings	60.04	II
2	The reluctance of some group members to attend trainings and workshops	55.54	IV
3	Lack of willingness of some group members to take up leadership roles	59.54	III
4	Absenteeism of some group members	61.29	1
5	Domestic workload of women and subsequent lack of time	53.79	V

Among the technical challenges listed out in Table 3. poor record management skills was ranked as first rank whereas, inadequate technical knowledge on value addition got the second rank. The findings of the study were in agreement with the results obtained by [9] and [10].

Inadequate technical knowledge and skill in plant protection aspects, poor adoption of scientific and innovative cultivation practices and inadequate timely and need based technical training programs were the other challenges felt by the women farmers.

Table 3. Technical challenges (N=120)

SI.No	Challenges	Mean Score	Rank
1	Inadequate technical knowledge and skill in plant protection aspects	61.75	III
2	Poor adoption of scientific and innovative cultivation practices	48.67	IV
3	Inadequate technical knowledge on value addition	66.83	II
4	Poor record management skills	68.63	I
5	Inadequate timely and need based technical training programs	37.92	V

Marketing was the major concern of the beneficiary women farmers regarding problems related to supplies. During peak seasons, women farmers were not able to sell the produce at fair price and were forced to sell at cheap rates.

Majority of respondents ranked price fluctuations in market as the most important one. Lack of coordination among developmental agencies while providing institutional assistance for timely marketing of produce were given second rank. The third rank was assigned to climatic vagaries contributing to crop loss. The results were in accordance with the findings of [11].

Table 4. Challenges related to supplies and services (N=120)

Sl.No	Challenges	Mean Score	Rank
1	High dependence on hired male labour for physically demanding farm operations	50.8	VIII
2	Inadequate availability of good quality inputs from government agencies	36.8	X
3	Delay in disbursement of credit from supporting agencies	40.4	IX
4	Lack of coordination among developmental agencies while providing institutional assistance for timely marketing of produce	74.0	II
5	High hired labour cost	61.3	V
6	Inadequate infrastructure facilities for cold storage	52.8	VII
7	Inadequate availability of gender-friendly farm machinery	53.2	VI
8	Price fluctuations in the market	78.7	I
9	High cost of cultivation	70.6	IV
10	Climatic vagaries contributing to crop loss	73.1	III

3.2 Suggestions to overcome the challenges faced by women collective farmers

Following suggestions may be considered to tackle the challenges of women collective farmers:

It has been recommended for reforming policy for legalization of land leasing for agricultural purpose. For improving market interventions, setting up of storage facilities and small-scale value addition units at ward levels to promote procurement and marketing in glut seasons and emergency situations (Covid-19) should be encouraged. Online marketing and provision of market information through ICT tools are also to be explored.

Special training programmes in the following areas should be organised.

1. Technical and financial support on scientific farming practices
2. Capacity building on legal literacy

3. Trainings on farm budgeting and record maintenance
4. Trainings on ICT tools and digital literacy
5. Ensure the service of sufficient qualified manpower

4. CONCLUSION

Major constraints faced by women collective farmers engaged in lease land farming were non-legalized status of leasing of land, absenteeism of some group members, improper maintenance of records on farm expenses and price fluctuations. The suggestions put forth in this study can help to overcome these challenges.

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