

Original Research Article

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

ABSTRACT

Lease land farming by women collectives is an initiative introduced by *Kudumbashree* to encourage cultivation among self - help groups. It not only contributes to significant changes in the lives of women farmers but also helps to increase agricultural production by bringing the fallow and cultivable waste- land into agricultural use. The present study was conducted in Thrissur district from June to August 2022. An ex-post- facto research design was used. Two blocks, Kodakara and Ollukkara, representing more area under banana and vegetable with the leased - in 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 were selected for the purpose. 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 was collected with the help of a 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 i.e., lease land related, group related, technical and supplies, and services. Among leasing 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 in 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 is 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 on 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 to for improve 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.

To tackle 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].

Collective farmers often struggled to coordinate their busy work schedule in order to find common time during which all of them were available. The study conducted in Eastern India and Nepal also revealed that farmers needed to be present together, but if some members were busy then conflicts aroused[5].

Telangana's collectives were constituted largely of poor SC women and they faced difficulties in leasing land. Upper-caste landowners were less willing to lease, and the geographic distance of SC communities from upper-caste settlements also reduced access to land near their homesteads [6].

The groups were financially devastated if they lost the crop due to natural causes like pest attack and flooding due to untimely rains and the loss was higher if it occurred during the final stages/ few weeks before harvest [7].

The lack of adequate advisory services constitutes a considerable obstacle to collective tendencies in many countries [8].

Although similar studies were conducted about farmer collectives, few studies discussed about the challenges faced by leased land women collectives of Kerala. 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. An ex- post- facto research design was used. Two blocks, Kodakara and Ollukkara, representing more areas 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 was collected from the women farmers, particularly engaged in leasing land collective farming in the area. A 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 be 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 [9], 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 leasing** 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 **leased-in land cultivation** as the major problem and ranked it as first. The tenancy **has banned** in Kerala **for a long time** but the state has recently permitted only self-help groups to lease land [10].

Poor fertility status of **leased 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 been fallow** for years. This made the short lease term of around three years unfair [11]. The above mentioned obstacles were **given third place by the respondents**.

Lessors' unreliable approach towards previous agreements was ranked in fourth position. Although **people had 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 in** 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 on leased - in land	44.83	VI
5	Little interest of some lessors in investing 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 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 training 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 [12]

Table 2. Group Related challenges (N=120)

Sl.No	Challenges	Mean Score	Rank
1	Irregularity in conducting group meetings	60.04	II
2	The reluctance of some group members to attend training 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	I
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 [13] and [14].

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)

Sl.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 a fair** price and were forced to sell at cheap rates.

A **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 place**. The third rank was assigned to climatic vagaries contributing to crop loss. The results were in accordance with the findings of [15].

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 products	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

The 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 purposes**. 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 **programms** 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 **services** of sufficient qualified manpower

4. CONCLUSION

Major constraints faced by women collective farmers engaged **in leased-in 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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