

**MINA SWAMINATHAN
MEDIA FELLOWSHIP****Gender and Millets:
Linkages and Inequalities****INSIGHT BRIEF - KERALA**

The Mina Swaminathan Media Fellowship constituted in 2020-21, aims to promote exchange of ideas between researchers and journalists for a healthier science and media partnership. It is in recognition of Ms Mina Swaminathan's contribution towards operationalising gender and development as part of MSSRF's core commitment to the pro-woman, pro-poor and pro-nature approach. As 2023 is the International Year of Millets, the topic for this year's media fellowship is: 'Gender and Millets: Linkages and Inequalities'. The fellowship focused on three states of India - Odisha, Kerala, and Tamil Nadu, and three journalists were awarded the fellowship.

Millets are a group of highly variable small-seeded grasses, widely grown around the world as cereal crops or grains for human food and as fodder. They are indigenous crops; the most widely grown millets are sorghum, pearl and finger millet. Known as the 'super foods', they are a good source of protein, fibre, key vitamins, and minerals. Millets can thrive under dry, high-temperature conditions and has a short growing season.

India is the largest producer of millets in the world, and despite that millets are central to the household food and nutrition security, they are attributed with low social status in India. Social, gender and nutrition inequalities are intertwined with how millets are grown, processed, cooked, and eaten. Millets, and other neglected and underutilised species are often viewed as women's crops¹ because traditionally, it is the rural women who cultivate these crops while the male farmers are concerned with cash crops. Women, especially those from tribal communities, are the guardians of traditional knowledge on millets. Till date, little has been done to reach out to women millet cultivators or to devise methods / techniques to ease the burden of cultivating millets².

A better understanding of the undercurrents across societal structures when it comes to millet production and consumption are essential for policy and practice uptake³. From access to and availability of millet seeds to how agricultural labour and millet-cropping decisions are shared, to cuisine practices among farm families need to be explored⁴. The millet value chains and market segmentations (urban and rural) need further exploration because market interdependence determines demand, supply, pricing and consumption of millets. Such information on the enabling environment for millets in India holds potential of getting the 'pro-women pro-millets' action sentiment into policy and public discourse for the International Year of Millets 2023.

Given the above context, and that 2023 is declared as International Year of Millets, this media fellowship topic is even more pertinent.

The insight brief is an analysis of feature articles published by the 2023 Mina Swaminathan Media Fellows and aims to highlight the problems and solutions linking millets and gender. The Briefs also present insights for policymakers.

¹<https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9781003044802-38/equity-gender-millets-india-nitya-rao-amit-mitra-raj-rengalakshmi>

²<http://59.160.153.188/library/node/525>

³<https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9781003044802-38/equity-gender-millets-india-nitya-rao-amit-mitra-raj-rengalakshmi>

⁴<http://59.160.153.188/library/node/531>



STORY 1: ATAPPADI SMALL GRAIN VILLAGE AS A MODEL FOR THE WORLD

By understanding and addressing the problems of millet cultivation among smallholder farmers and implementing effective solutions, policymakers can further support the sustainable development and economic well-being of tribal communities in Wayanad, Kerala.

Problems:

Abandonment of Millet Cultivation: Tribal communities in Wayanad district, Kerala, have almost abandoned millet cultivation due to water scarcity, lack of adequate land, and economic losses.

Challenges for Livestock Farmers: Livestock farmers in the region face challenges such as wild animal attacks and shrinking space for grazing, affecting their livelihoods.

Middlemen Exploitation: Farmers faced difficulty in getting adequate prices for their millet produce, as middlemen took advantage by purchasing millet at very low prices.

Human-Wildlife Conflict: The increasing instances of wild animal attacks in Atappadi pose a significant threat to farmers and their crops.

Solutions:

Millet Village Scheme

The "Millet Village" project initiated by the Kerala Agriculture Department and ST Department has led to a significant spike in millet cultivation in Atappadi. The project focuses on uplifting the livelihoods of tribal people by promoting millet cultivation, which requires less water and faces fewer pest infestations.

Government Procurement

To support millet farmers and ensure fair prices, the Kerala Government has intervened by procuring millets at a high price, with Rs 60 per kg for organic-certified millets and Rs 40 per kg for non-organic ones. This intervention ensures that farmers are not exploited by middlemen.

Experimenting with Solutions

Indigenous farmers are experimenting with various options to mitigate human-wildlife conflicts. This includes using beehive fences as a deterrent, though they have limitations, with instances of wild elephants still encroaching on millet farms.

Cultivating Special Pulse Variety

Some farmers, inspired by a farm woman named Chindi, have started cultivating a special variety of pulse called "Attukombha Amara" to ward off wild animals. This pulse species is believed to emit a smell that is unbearable to wild animals, potentially providing a natural deterrent.

Insights for Policymakers:

Success of Millet Village Scheme

The Millet Village Scheme has shown significant success in promoting millet cultivation among tribal communities. Policymakers can further invest in and expand such initiatives to other regions to boost millet cultivation.

Enhancing Human-Wildlife Conflict Mitigation

Addressing the issue of human-wildlife conflict is crucial for the safety and livelihoods of farmers. Policymakers should explore and support the implementation of effective deterrent methods, considering both traditional and modern technologies.

Market Access and Fair Prices

Ensuring fair prices for millet produce through government procurement has proven beneficial for farmers. Continuation and improvement of such policies can incentivise farmers to continue millet cultivation.

Climate Resilient Agriculture

Given the challenges of water scarcity and erratic climate events, policymakers should focus on promoting climate-resilient agricultural practices, such as millet cultivation, to support farmers in adapting to changing environmental conditions.



STORY 2: MILLET AND HEALTH ISSUES OF WOMEN AND CHILDREN

Problems:

High Infant Mortality in Attapadi: Since 2013, Attapadi Taluk in Palakkad district has been known for its high infant mortality rate. Malnutrition and other health-related issues among tribal mothers are believed to be contributing factors.

Neglect of Millet in Wayanad: In contrast to Attapadi, the tribal-dominated Wayanad district lacks millet cultivation and its presence in the cuisine. Tribal mothers blame the shift to a "new generation food culture" that does not include millet, which has potentially led to health issues.

Anaemia Prevalence: Despite Kerala's relatively better health indicators, there has been a significant increase in lifestyle diseases. Anaemia is one such concern, affecting 1% of the population severely and 21% moderately.

Solutions:

Attapadi Millet Village Scheme:

The Kerala government's 'Attapadi Millet Village Scheme' initiated in 2017, aims to improve the health of tribal women and children, reduce infant mortality, and provide better livelihoods by promoting millet cultivation.

Promoting Millet-Oriented Food System:

Encouraging the cultivation and consumption of millet among tribal communities has led to a positive impact on health in Attapadi. By integrating millets into their food culture, it has contributed to a decline in infant mortality.

Insights for Policymakers:

Success of Millet Village Scheme

The decline in infant mortality deaths in Attapadi can be attributed, at least in part, to the promotion of millet cultivation and consumption. Policymakers should continue to support such schemes that address health and livelihood issues among tribal communities.

The 'Attapadi Millet Village Scheme' has shown promising results in improving health and livelihoods in Attapadi. However, promoting millet cultivation and consumption should not be limited to specific regions, as it could also address health concerns in other areas like Wayanad. Policymakers should adopt a comprehensive approach, considering the nutritional benefits of millets and its potential role in combating deficiencies like anaemia. Continuous monitoring, research, and education will be vital in formulating effective policies to enhance the overall well-being of tribal communities in Kerala.

Nutritional Awareness and Education

In Wayanad, tribal mothers' testimonies indicate that the neglect of millet in the diet may have adverse health effects. Policy initiatives should focus on raising awareness about the nutritional benefits of millet and promote its inclusion in their food habits.

Addressing Anaemia

Despite Kerala's overall health standards, the prevalence of anaemia remains a concern. Policymakers should devise targeted interventions to address anaemia and other lifestyle diseases, including promoting nutrient-rich foods like millet.

Holistic Approach to Health

Policymakers should adopt a holistic approach to health and nutrition, considering traditional dietary practices and indigenous food systems. Integrating millet into tribal diets can serve as a potential strategy to improve overall health outcomes.

Research and Data Collection

Continual research and data collection on the impact of millet cultivation and consumption on health can provide valuable insights and guide evidence-based policy decisions.



STORY 3: KERALA'S TRIBAL FARMERS SOW SUCCESS WITH MILLETS

Problems:

High Infant Mortality and Health Issues: Attapadi Taluk in Kerala, populated by tribal communities, has been facing high infant mortality and various health issues, partly due to malnutrition.

Shift from Millet Cultivation: In the past, millet cultivation was prevalent among the tribal communities in Attapadi. However, due to low prices offered by middlemen, farmers shifted away from millet cultivation in favor of other crops.

Threat of Wild Animals: Farmers in Attapadi face challenges from wild animals, such as elephants, deer, and bison, which frequently damage millet crops, leading to economic losses and posing a threat to food security.

Solutions:

Attapadi Millet Village Scheme

The 'Attapadi Millet Village' project, launched in 2017 by the Kerala government, aims to reintroduce millet cultivation among the tribal communities to improve their health and livelihoods.

Procurement at Fair Prices

The government has assured millet farmers of fair prices, thereby encouraging them to return to millet cultivation.

Beehive Fences

Farmers are exploring traditional methods like setting up beehive fences to deter wild animals from entering their fields.

Increased Millet Cultivation

The project's focus on millet cultivation has led to a significant increase in millet farmers, especially among women.

The 'Attapadi Millet Village' project has brought about positive changes in the lives of tribal communities in Attapadi Taluk. However, challenges such as human-wildlife conflict remain, and policymakers need to continue to address these issues to ensure the sustained success of millet cultivation and its associated benefits. The project's multifaceted approach, community involvement, and focus on nutrition can provide valuable insights for designing similar initiatives in other areas facing similar challenges.

Insights for Policymakers:

Success of the Millet Village Scheme

The 'Attapadi Millet Village' project has shown positive results, with an increase in millet cultivation and improved health outcomes among tribal communities.

Addressing Human-Wildlife Conflict

While beehive fences have been tried as a solution, they have limitations and may not be entirely effective in deterring wild animals. Policymakers should explore other methods, such as creating designated areas for wildlife to prevent them from raiding fields.

Supporting Livelihoods

The government's assurance of fair prices for millets has been a motivating factor for farmers to shift back to millet cultivation. Continuation and improvement of such policies are essential for sustained livelihood improvements.

Holistic Approach to Health

The project's focus on improving health through millet consumption shows promise. Policymakers should continue to support and promote nutrition-based initiatives, especially among vulnerable communities.

Community Involvement

Local communities have taken the initiative to protect their crops from wild animals. Policymakers should involve communities in designing and implementing solutions for human-wildlife conflicts, ensuring their perspectives and traditional knowledge are considered.

Scaling-up Initiatives

The success of the millet village scheme in Attapadi could serve as a model for similar initiatives in other regions to promote sustainable agriculture, improve health outcomes, and empower marginalised communities.