



MINA SWAMINATHAN MEDIA FELLOWSHIP

Gender and Millets: Linkages and Inequalities



INSIGHT BRIEF - ODISHA



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: WOMEN ARE NEGLECTED IN MILLET!

In conclusion, promoting gender equality and empowering women farmers are crucial aspects of successful millet cultivation initiatives. Policymakers should address the specific challenges faced by women, such as land ownership issues and financial exclusion, and create an enabling environment for their active and equal participation in millet farming. Data-driven policy decisions, targeted financial incentives, and supportive institutions can help uplift women farmers and contribute to the success of millet cultivation initiatives.

Problems:

Limited Participation of Women Farmers: Women who invest significant labor in millet production are still excluded from the decision-making process at home and are not directly involved in seed selection, production, and marketing of millets. They do not have control over the financial transactions related to millet cultivation.

Lack of Land Ownership for Women: Many women farmers do not have their own land and cultivate on leased land or in the name of male family members, which prevents them from registering themselves in the millet marketplace (mandi) and receiving the financial benefits from their agricultural efforts.

Data Gap: The government lacks specific data on the number of women millet farmers, their registration under the Odisha Millet Mission, and their interest in cultivating traditional millet varieties.

Solutions:

Empowerment and Inclusion

Policies and interventions should be designed to empower women farmers and ensure their equal participation in decision-making processes related to millet farming. Their voices should be heard and their opinions valued.

Land Rights for Women

Measures should be taken to provide land rights and ownership to women, allowing them to have control over their farming activities and ensuring that they receive the financial benefits from millet cultivation.

Financial Inclusion

Efforts should be made to ensure that the money earned from millet cultivation goes directly to the bank accounts of women farmers, enhancing their financial independence and stability.

Insights for Policymakers:

Importance of Gender-Inclusive Approach

Policymakers should adopt a gender-inclusive approach while implementing agricultural schemes like the Millet Mission. It is essential to address the specific challenges faced by women farmers and create opportunities for their active participation and economic empowerment.

Data Collection and Analysis

Accurate and comprehensive data collection is vital for informed policy decisions. The government should focus on collecting gender-disaggregated data on women farmers involved in millet cultivation to understand their needs and challenges better.

Awareness and Education

Raising awareness about the importance of women's involvement in millet cultivation and providing them with necessary education and training can enhance their skills and confidence in decision-making.

Financial Incentives for Women Farmers

Introducing specific financial incentives and schemes targeted at women farmers can encourage their active participation and recognize their contributions to millet farming.

Land Ownership Policies

Policymakers should promote land ownership policies that prioritize gender equality and ensure that women have equal access to and control over agricultural land.

Supportive Institutions

Creating producer companies or cooperatives that include and support women farmers can provide them with a collective platform to access resources, market their produce, and have a stronger voice in decision-making processes.

Empowerment through Training

Providing technical and business training to women farmers can enhance their skills and knowledge in millet cultivation, production, and marketing, making them more self-reliant.



STORY 2: EMPOWERING RURAL WOMEN THROUGH MILLETS: ODISHA'S MISSION SHAKTI REVOLUTION

The success of the Odisha Millet Mission and the emerging trend of millets in the food industry offer valuable insights for policy. By promoting gender-inclusive decision-making, ensuring direct financial control for women farmers, and addressing data gaps, policymakers can create a more supportive and empowering environment for women involved in millet cultivation. Collaboration with the hotel industry and scaling up successful models can further boost the financial independence of women farmers and preserve the rich culinary heritage of the state.

Problems:

Limited Participation of Women in Decision-making: Despite their significant contribution to millet cultivation and the Millet industry, women in Odisha are not fully involved in decision-making processes, including seed selection, production, and marketing of millets.

Lack of Direct Financial Control: The money earned from millet cultivation does not directly reach the women farmers, which

hinders their financial independence and restricts their access to resources.

Data Gap on Women Farmers: There is a lack of specific data on the number of women millet farmers, their registration under the Odisha Millet Mission, and their involvement in traditional millet varieties.

Solutions:

Promoting Gender-Inclusive Decision-making

The establishment of community seed banks run and maintained by tribal women farmers proved to be a successful solution to conserve and sustain traditional millet varieties.

Financial Inclusion

The success of the seed bank system led to increased participation, involving hundreds of farmers, which could be further scaled up to reach more communities.

Data Collection and Analysis

By encouraging the cultivation of traditional varieties, farmers rediscovered and revived the cultivation of millets that were abandoned for a generation.

Insights for Policymakers:

Positive Impact of Millet Mission

The success of the Odisha Millet Mission and its initiatives like Millet Shakti outlets and cafes have led to financial independence for many women self-help groups. These initiatives have also helped in promoting traditional millet food and culinary heritage.

Importance of Hotel Industry

Collaboration with the hotel industry has contributed to the popularity of millet-based foods, reaching a wider audience, including domestic and foreign tourists. The hotel industry's role in promoting millets can be further harnessed to support women farmers and enhance their financial opportunities.

Addressing Land Ownership

Policymakers should focus on measures that provide land rights and ownership to women farmers, enabling them to have control over their farming activities and financial transactions.

Encouraging Women Entrepreneurship

Initiatives like Millet Shakti cafes and outlets have empowered women farmers to become entrepreneurs and participate actively in the food industry.

Sustainability and Quality Assurance

Regular inspection and monitoring of Millet Shakti cafes and outlets to maintain food quality standards are essential to sustain customer trust and long-term success.

Scaling-up Success

Successful models like the Keonjhar Millet Shakti Cafe should be replicated and scaled up in other locations to benefit more women self-help groups and communities.

Tailored Support for Women Farmers

Specific schemes and incentives targeted at women farmers can further encourage their involvement in millet cultivation and enhance their economic prospects.