



## **MINA SWAMINATHAN MEDIA FELLOWSHIP**

## **Gender and Millets: Linkages and Inequalities**



### **INSIGHT BRIEF - TAMIL NADU**



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.

**M**illets 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 crops<sup>1</sup> 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 millets<sup>2</sup>.

A better understanding of the undercurrents across societal structures when it comes to millet production and consumption are essential for policy and practice uptake<sup>3</sup>. 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 explored<sup>4</sup>. 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.

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

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

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

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



## STORY 1: A MIGRANT FARMER THEN, A COMPANY DIRECTOR TODAY – THE SUCCESS STORY OF AN ACCOMPLISHED TRIBAL WOMAN

### Problems:

**Migratory Trend:** After the millet harvest season, farmers in Aalaththoor Village are left without work, leading to a significant migration of tribal farmers to different districts and neighboring states in search of employment opportunities.

**Impact on Lives and Education:** The migratory trend negatively affects the lives of the farmers and their families, disrupting stability and livelihoods. It also hampers the education of the children due to frequent relocations.

**Sustainable Income:** The lack of consistent work and income post-harvest contributes to the cycle of migration, perpetuating the uncertainty in the lives of the tribal farmers.

**Drying Facilities:** The absence of a secure and concrete drying space forces the farmers to dry their produce on roadsides, making it vulnerable to damage from passing vehicles.

### Insights for Policymakers:

#### Success of 'Vaadi' Scheme:

The 'Vaadi - Small Farm' scheme has proven effective in empowering tribal farmers and breaking the migration cycle. Governments and organisations should continue to invest in similar targeted schemes to promote sustainable agriculture and livelihoods.

By addressing the problems of migrating farmers and implementing suitable solutions, policymakers can facilitate the growth and prosperity of tribal women farmers in Aalaththoor Village, Kollimalai, and foster a more sustainable and inclusive agricultural community.

### Solutions:

#### Vaadi - Small Farm Scheme

To break the cycle of migration and provide sustainable income, the tribal farmers in Aalaththoor are empowered through the 'Vaadi' scheme. This scheme enables round-the-clock integrated cultivation methods, ensuring continuous work and income for the farmers.

#### Formation of Kollimalai Producers Company

By integrating producer groups across villages in Kollimalai, including Aalaththoor, into a unified Kollimalai Producers Company, the farmers can cultivate, process, and market various products beyond millets collectively.

#### Leadership of Ms. Vennila

Her exemplary journey from being a migrant farmer to becoming a director of the FPC serves as an inspiration and showcases the positive impact of targeted interventions.

#### Women Empowerment

The success of the women millet producers group, led by Vennila, highlights the crucial role of women in agricultural activities. Policies should encourage and support women's leadership in farming and related enterprises.



## Diversification for Stability

The farmers' efforts to diversify their value addition beyond millets demonstrate the importance of seeking additional business opportunities to sustain a stable market and income.

## Infrastructure Development

Providing secure and proper drying facilities near the farms are essential to maintain the quality of the produce and reduce post-harvest losses. Investments in infrastructure development can boost the agricultural sector's efficiency and productivity.

## Addressing Seasonal Unemployment

Policies should focus on creating alternative employment opportunities during non-harvest seasons to prevent the migration of farmers and promote rural development.

### STORY 2 – WOMEN AT THE FOREFRONT OF PRESERVING OF TRADITIONAL MILLET VARIETIES - ROLE OF COMMUNITY SEED BANK IN PRESERVING AND AIDING MILLET CULTIVATION, AND CONSUMPTION IN KOLLI HILLS, NAMAKKAL

## Problems:

**Traditional Varieties at Risk:** Traditional varieties of millets native to Kolli hills were at risk of being lost due to modern farming practices and commercial seeds.

**Lack of Seed Availability:** Farmers faced challenges in accessing and obtaining traditional millet seeds, which affected the cultivation and conservation of these varieties.

**Sustainable Seed Exchange:** Ensuring a sustainable and fair seed exchange system was crucial to maintain the seed bank and encourage farmers to participate.

The community seed bank system in Kolli Hills has demonstrated the potential of community-based initiatives by conserving traditional millet varieties and promoting sustainable agriculture. By addressing challenges and supporting such models, policymakers can create an enabling environment for sustainable farming practices and food security.

**Limited Market Access:** Farmers might face difficulties in marketing their produce and value-added products, affecting their income and livelihood opportunities.



## Solutions:

### Community Seed Banks

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.

### Scaling-up Community Involvement

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.

### Focus on Nutritional Security

The major part of the produce being used for farmers' own consumption ensures sufficient nutritional levels, addressing issues of food security and nutrition.

### Seed Return Policy

Implementing a seed return policy, where farmers receiving seeds from the bank return twice the quantity, helps maintain the seed bank's stock and ensures the continuity of the system.

### Promotion of Traditional Varieties

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

### Value-Addition and Market Access

Farmers' engagement in value addition and selling products through outlets enhances their market access, income, and livelihood opportunities.

## Insights for Policymakers:

### Community-led Initiatives

The success of the community seed bank system showcases the effectiveness of community-led initiatives in preserving traditional knowledge and varieties.

### Revival of Indigenous Practices

Encouraging farmers to return to indigenous and traditional practices can lead to the conservation of biodiversity and sustainable farming methods.

### Empowering Women Farmers

The involvement of tribal women farmers in managing the seed banks not only promotes seed conservation but also empowers women in agricultural decision-making.

### Promoting Local Markets

Supporting local markets and outlets for selling value-added products can boost the income and economic opportunities for farmers.

### Replicability of the Model

This successful model of community seed banks can be replicated in other regions and communities to conserve local biodiversity and traditional crop varieties.

### Government Support

Policymakers can provide support through policies and initiatives that encourage and strengthen community-led conservation efforts.