

**CRISIS TO CONFIDENCE:
THE EXPERIENCE OF *MAHILA KISAN SASAKTHIKARAN PARIYOJANA* -
PROGRAMME FOR EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN FARMERS - IN VIDARBHA
REGION OF MAHARASHTRA, INDIA**

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Introduction

Genesis of the Mahila Kisan Sasakthikaran Pariyojana Programme

In India between 1995 and 2009 about 241,679 farmers have committed suicide according to officially reported statistics (CHR&GJ, 2011). Suicide by farmers, in India, is just a symptomatic manifestation of the severe agricultural crisis gripping the country. Agriculture-related suicides by farmers are occurring in the arid and semi-arid agro-ecological zones of India. The majority who commit suicides in these regions are cash crop dependant farmers. The largest number of farmers' suicides has been reported from the State of Maharashtra: 44,276 farm suicides during 1997 to 2009, which accounts for 1/5th of the total farmers' suicides in the country as a whole (Nagaraj, 2008). Within the state of Maharashtra, farm suicides are mostly concentrated in Vidarbha region. Agriculture in Vidarbha region is rain fed and farming is practiced under harsh agro-climatic conditions. The predominant cropping system in Vidarbha is cash crop based - mainly cotton and soybean. Livelihoods of cash crop growing farmers are highly vulnerable as they suffer from the vagaries of monsoon as well as of market. Many academic and government-commissioned studies have examined in detail aspects relating to farmers' suicides in Vidarbha region.¹ Of special mention here is the National Commission on Farmers (NCF),² constituted by the Government of India. The NCF held several formal consultations across the country and also directly interacted with the farmers and other local stakeholders in some of the districts in the country. As chairman of NCF, Professor M. S. Swaminathan visited Vidarbha region during October 2005 and interacted with several of the affected families, farm leaders, social activists, nongovernmental organisation representatives, politicians, government officials, academics and media representatives. These interactions brought to light the dire plight of the suicide affected families. Young school going children of many of these families were forced to take up the responsibility of contributing to the families' income to make both ends meet.

Following a field visit to Vidarbha region, the M. S. Swaminathan Research Foundation (MSSRF)³ initiated an Education Support Programme (ESP) in 2006 for school children from suicide-affected farmers' families in Wardha district. The programme was started with the

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¹ See, among others, Government of India *et al.* (2004); Mohanty, Shroff (2004); Mohanty (2005); Tata Institute of Social Sciences (2005); Government of India (2006); Mishra (2006); Jadhav (2008).

² In the wake of severe agrarian crisis gripping the country, the GoI constituted the NCF in the year 2004, with Professor M.S.Swaminathan as Chairman. The NCF was given the broad mandate to go into the grievances of farmers and to prepare a road map for sustainable development of agriculture, recommend policies, programmes and measures for accelerated and diversified agricultural development to alleviate rural poverty and impart viability and attractiveness to farming as a remunerative and rewarding profession (NCF Terms of Reference-NCF Reports). The NCF visited several of the suicide affected regions across the country.

³ Professor M. S. Swaminathan is the Chairman of MSSRF.

aim of providing financial support to the children of affected families to continue their education. The interaction with the mothers of children covered under ESP brought out the high degree of vulnerability in the lives and livelihoods of the women farmers in the region. The nature of agriculture in Vidarbha is marked by backwardness and adversity. Agriculture is practiced under unfavourable agro-ecological conditions with low levels of irrigation and modernization, leading to high levels of instability and vulnerability of the production system. The women farmers, in particular suicide victims, struggling to eke out a livelihood in an agricultural domain which is wrought with such adversities need emotional, economic and technical support. Their capacities need to be built up to help them take informed scientific decisions and perform their role as farmers effectively. Moreover, in spite of being actively engaged in farming and farm-related activities for sustenance, 'women farmers' are not recognised as 'farmers'. Women also lack ownership rights to the land on which they toil. Support in the form of access to credit, technology, infrastructure and markets would go a long way in empowering women farmers.

M. S. Swaminathan Research Foundation

Over the last 20 years, MSSRF has developed science and technology-based interventions focusing on rural women, and providing them with necessary support for effectively managing their natural resource base, enhancing their livelihoods through skill and capacity building, access to knowledge and information and opportunities for market linkages for both primary and value-added products. By adding value to their time and labour, the number of work hours in a day in rural women's lives are reduced and economic value is added to each hour of work. Its work on community conservation of biodiversity, has enabled tribal and rural communities of Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Orissa, to significantly contribute towards strengthening local conservation traditions, conservation and enhancement of local bio-resources, establishment and management of community gene-seed-grain banks and enhancing their livelihoods through value addition to the resources. MSSRF's bio-village paradigm focuses on enhancing lives and livelihood of the communities through appropriate on-farm and off-farm interventions. Its focus on ICT based intervention has resulted in grassroots women knowledge holders taking a key leadership role in rural areas. MSSRF has enabled many women leaders' who now occupy elected positions in the local bodies and have represented their community in several regional, national and international fora.

The Mahila Kisan Sashaktikaran Pariyojana Programme

Mahila Kisan Sashaktikaran Pariyojana (MKSP), a Programme for Empowerment of Women Farmers, was launched in 2007 by MSSRF to address some of the concerns of women farmers in Vidarbha region of Maharashtra. MKSP endeavours to bring about positive change in the lives of women farmers through mobilising them into collectives, helping generate an independent identity as farmers, building their skills and capacities as farmers and in problem-solving more generally, facilitating their increased involvement in decision making in their families and facilitating formation of community-based institutions which will emerge as a support and pressure group.

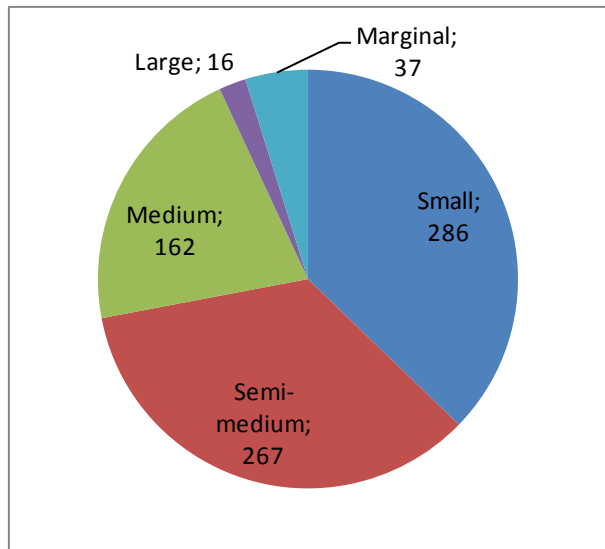
Programme strategy

The strategy adopted under MKSP has two prime foci to ensure the sustainability of the programme: the institution building aspect of the programme; the extension and scaling up aspect of interventions.

1. Mobilisation of women farmers into collectives: MKSP is a membership-based organisation. The criteria for a woman to be a member of a women farmers' group are that she should be a resident of the same village and should be actively engaged in

agricultural activities with or without formal land entitlements. The women farmers groups thus formed are subject to certain operational guidelines, which ensure that the women farmers group affairs are democratically managed, based on clearly spelt out objectives, norms, and rules.

While forming the women farmers' groups, conscious efforts are taken to include marginal, small and semi-medium farmers as well as other marginalised sections of the society such as Scheduled Tribes, Scheduled Castes, single women etc. At present, MKSP has about 58 active women farmers' groups with a total membership of 795 women farmers spread across 47 villages in Wardha and Yavatamal districts of Vidarbha region. About 323 members are marginal and small farmers accounting for about 41 per cent of the total members (see the chart on the right: distribution of ownership holding among MKSP member households according to farm size). Land holdings <1 ha are marginal, 1-1.999 ha are small, 2-3.999 ha are semi medium, 4.-9.999 ha are medium and > 9.999 ha are large.



Of the 795 members, 164 belong to Scheduled Caste, 103 to Scheduled Tribes and 13 to Nomadic Tribes taking the total representation of the socially marginalised sections in the group to 35 per cent.⁴

2. Capacity building of women farmers' collectives: Capacity building of women farmers' collectives is taken up under different themes such as organizational management, sustainable agriculture practices and food and nutrition security. The strategy adopted for capacity building includes a) awareness creation through monthly meetings, b) demonstrations and exposure visits; c) skill training by sourcing into both in-house and external resource persons and d) facilitation through helping effect linkages, providing access to technological and financial resources.
 - *Organisational management:* Women farmers are trained on organization management skills to build their capacities to run women farmer collectives. These include training on recordkeeping, accounting, communication, mobilization and building linkages with local administration at all levels.
 - *Sustainable agriculture:* The concept of sustainable agriculture in its entirety - from seed to seed - is taken to women farmers. Sustainable agriculture is an approach towards Integrated Crop Management techniques comprising various elements such as integrated pest, disease and weed management; integrated plant nutrient systems; integrated soil and water management practices etc. Chemical or synthetic inputs are used at bare minimum quantity depending upon the need. Natural resource management in the women farmers field is done through soil and water conservation

⁴ Based on the detailed data collected on individual member profile of women farmer groups.

structures such as contour bunding. Soil health management is done through continuous monitoring of the soil health using a soil health card.

- *Food and nutrition security:* Capacity building on household food and nutrition security are taken up on a life cycle approach. Awareness creation on issues relating to health and sanitation are also addressed with the members of the women collectives. Locally suitable food crops, horticultural crops, and backyard kitchen gardens are promoted to increase household consumption of local food grains, vegetables, and fruits among the members. Periodic health camps are conducted to address the health needs of the group members. Better access to the various government schemes related to food, nutrition and health is also facilitated under this component.



Participatory need assessment with women farmers

3. Extension and scaling up: The programme has an informal community based extension approach with a strong focus on farmer-to-farmer spread of technologies and knowledge.
 - *Farmer to farmer extension:* The group members who participate in capacity building exercises under the various components share the knowledge gained through the capacity building exercises and practical experiences in field level implementation of technologies with other group members. In short, they play the role of barefoot extension workers acting as catalysts of change and handhold other group members in the project area. Further, the existing group members also facilitate formation of new groups and thus help in the expansion of the programme.

- *Monthly meetings as learning forums:* In the monthly meetings of women farmers groups, aspects on which members' capacities were enhanced are taken up for detailed discussion. This provides an opportunity for women farmers to share their experiences, clarify doubts and discuss advantages and limitations. Open discussions based on practical difficulties provide scope for strengthening the concept as well as internalizing the skill that was imparted. These forums also address the specific constraints faced in field level technology adoption and suggest ways of technology modification to suit local conditions and practices ensuring their higher adoption rate by women farmers. This approach helps ensure that the knowledge and skills gained through trainings are internalized and members adopt best practices.



Training on insecticide resistance management

Uniqueness of the initiative

Identity of women as farmers

Traditionally, although women have been actively engaged in farming they have never been recognised as “farmers”. Technology development and delivery being based on concept of men as farmers, women have always faced limited recognition or neglect from the public extension system. Women farmer groups promoted under MKSP are unique in the sense that they give recognition to women as farmers and build their capacities as farmers. Though organisations for women farmers are not entirely a novel phenomena in Maharashtra or across India, what is unique about MKSP is that it is the first women farmers organisation which was started in the backdrop of the large number of farmers suicide happening across the country. The emphasis on the inclusion of victims of farmers suicide, and other disadvantaged section of women like single women and widow farmers is what makes MKSP unique. MKSP also stresses inclusion of women belonging to marginalised sections among

the farmers such as marginal and small farmers, farmers belonging to socially disadvantaged communities like scheduled caste, scheduled tribe, nomadic tribes and the special backward castes.

Difference over Self Help Groups (SHGs)

Women farmers' collectives promoted under MKSP are different from SHGs, the widely accepted model of women's collectives across many countries in the developing world. Discussion and positive action on more substantive issues related to their livelihood distinguishes the women farmer groups from SHGs whose main function relate only to regular saving and credit activities. MKSP does not stress saving and credit; its focus is women's empowerment through formation of women collectives and capacity building of these collectives to function as independent entities. Women farmer group members also put to use the knowledge and skill gained through the capacity building exercises to improve their lives and livelihoods. Women farmer groups provide a forum for women farmers for discussions of problems encountered in their farms and learn by sharing of experiences.

Empowerment through access to entitlements

Lack of access to entitlements is a serious issue among women farmers. Facilitation to access to entitlement using household entitlement card is a unique strategy adopted by MSSRF to reach these entitlements to the target households. Household entitlement cards provide information on various schemes implemented by different departments of the central and state governments. For each one of the schemes listed in the entitlement card, information on eligibility criteria, documents required at the time of application, the department responsible for sanctioning the scheme, the contact person and address of the department etc are provided. Facilitation to access to the government schemes pertaining to agriculture, food and nutrition and health are taken up with women farmers using this entitlement card.

ICT for empowerment

ICT is used as a tool for rural development, women's empowerment and bridging the urban-rural digital divide.⁵ Empowerment of women farmers entails ability of the women farmers to take informed, scientific, and weather-based farm decisions. Women farmers in MKSP are provided information on prices and cultivation practices through the ICT network. In addition to this, agro-advisories (5 free voice messages daily) are disseminated through mobile phones using green sim cards. These voice messages provide day-to-day crop management advice to the women farmers.

National recognition

This small initiative started in Vidarbha has now become a national programme under the same title, viz, *Mahila Kisan Sashaktikaran Pariyojana* and special provision has been made in the union budget of 2010-11 for expanding this programme on a national scale.⁶ This marks the beginning of a new era where women farmers and farm women are enabled to play their rightful role in strengthening national food security and agrarian prosperity.

Important results

The programme has had both tangible and intangible results. The direct tangible outcome of the initiative so far is currently all 795 members of MKSP have received awareness and training on different sustainable agricultural practices, food and nutrition security issues and

⁵ Towards this end, MSSRF promotes the Village Resource Centres (VRCs) and Village Knowledge Centres (VKCs). VRCs and VKCs are ICT based information dissemination centres established at villages.

⁶ Budget Speech - Union Budget 2010-11 Government of India.

on organization management. About 2200 ha. of land have been brought under one or the other sustainable agriculture practice for which the women farmers have received training. Adoption of best practices in members' field has created demonstration effects in MKSP villages resulting in demand by non-members for capacity building on these issues. So while the programme directly covers only its members, the impact of the interventions under the programme extends to a larger section of the society resulting in a multiplier effect.



Women farmers on exposure trip to village resource centre

The intangible and the more important results in terms of empowerment under MKSP, is the evolution of women farmers as better decision-makers, improvement in their self confidence and development of a general sense of belonging among women farmers. That is, women pass through the various stages of empowerment and ultimately reach a stage wherein they are in a position to take control of their lives and livelihoods. Given below is some of the first person account of the change that MKSP has brought in the lives of its members.

Voices of empowerment from the field

I have never been active in farming either in my parental home or at my in-laws place. The unexpected death of my husband and the hostility of my in-laws following his death forced me to take charge of my life and livelihood for the sake of my children. I started cultivating my late husband's land. I felt very helpless and used to desperately consult other villagers for inputs, practices etc. But women farmer group (MKSP) changed all that. It built my confidence, gave me the strength to fight against odds, taught me to stand on my feet and above all gave me a feeling that I was not alone. As a member of the group I learnt a lot of things regarding cultivation and now I am in a position to teach good cultivation practices to others. Others in the group respect and support me

and the group gives me a sense of belonging. Ms. Ujwala Petkar, Kurzadi Fort, Wardha Taluk

Before the death of my husband I never stepped out of my village on my own. I was timid and lacked confidence. Now I travel to Sewagram, and Wardha as a group member. The exposure and experience got through the group has made me more daring. Interactions in group meetings and group fairs have improved my communication skills. My self confidence has improved as the group gives me a feeling that I am part of a large family. Ms. Pratibha Bagath, Ashta, Wardha Taluk

I am illiterate and lack self confidence. I have never been involved in decision making at home or in the field. I have never been outside my village before being a group member. Now I travel to Ralegaon on my own and buy seeds and other inputs. As secretary of the group I mobilize the group members to attend meetings and training programmes. I talk to them in the group meetings. I have gained a lot of confidence being part of the group. I even spoke to some officials who had come to review our group and its work. Ms. Subhadra Mishram, Khairgaon, Relegaon Taluk

Prospects for sustainability

The institution building strategy involves mobilization of women farmers into collectives, and building their capacities to better their lives and livelihoods. MKSP will eventually create community based organisation to institutionalize the ongoing activities under the initiative. This envisages a three-tier structure consisting of women farmer groups at the village level, cluster of 8-10 women farmers groups at the block⁷ level, and federation of all the women farmers groups at the district level. The federation of women farmers will be a registered body to take up services like credit and market linkages. The federation will serve as an aggregator and source inputs collectively for its members as well take up collective marketing on behalf of its members. The members will benefit from the economies of scale that results from the bulk purchase and sale of inputs and produce. Federations will also be able to approach commercial banks for credit. The evolution of the community based organisation with the federation of women farmers as the apex body is the ultimate step towards ensuring sustainability of the programme.

Challenges

There have been a lot of challenges in operationalising the programme at the ground level. Some of the major challenges and learnings are described below:

1. Lack of environment to allow women to be decision makers: in a patriarchal society such as India, decision-making powers are largely vested with men. Moreover, the lack of ownership of resources places women at a disadvantage when it comes to making decisions about livelihoods. This makes it difficult for the women to put to practical use the knowledge and skill gained through the capacity building exercises. This in turn affects the adoption and spread of the best practices among the target audience.

⁷ A block is an administrative unit comprising of a group of contiguous villages.



Preparing integrated fertiliser

2. Trend of SHG mode of women empowerment: Any group formation among women has always been in the savings and credit (SHG) mode with focus on microfinance and linkage to institutional credit. Motivating the women to form groups which, unlike the SHGs, have capacity building of women farmers in sustainable agricultural practices as its prime focus was a major challenge.
3. Prevalence of conventional practices: Farmers in Wardha generally did not take up sustainable agricultural practices like contour bunds or apply bio-inputs in farming. Changing people's mindset and mobilising them to take up these practices was a challenging task.

Learning

The past 4 years have also produced a lot of lessons for the betterment of the programme:

- **Need for gender inclusiveness:** Though the programme is targeted towards women, the patriarchal nature of the society in Vidarbha calls for inclusion of men in the capacity building programmes, to ensure translation of knowledge gained by women farmers to positive action in the field. Suitable strategies for inclusion of men need to be devised in consultation with the member women farmers. Inclusion of men will not only ensure better adoption of technologies and ideas, but also influences space for greater participation of women in decision making related to agriculture and food and nutrition security at the household level.

- Resource support: Capacity building initiatives should be complemented with timely resource support (technical and financial) to ensure effective utilization of new learnings and adoption of new skills by women farmers.
- Need for an enabling policy environment: A series of policy measures which will create an enabling environment for adoption of sustainable agricultural practices in the region is crucial for adoption and spread of these practices. The enabling environment would mean a credit system which caters to the need of farmers adopting sustainable agricultural practices, an effective public extension system to create awareness and facilitate the spread of sustainable agricultural practices, and incentives for producing biomass – such as subsidy for livestock rearing, subsidized supply of bio-inputs, etc.

Conclusion

Empowerment is a very broad term and individuals go through various stages of empowerment. MKSP - MSSRF's women farmers' initiative in Vidarbha attempts at gradual empowerment of women farmers through multiple processes. The process of awareness creation, capacity building and facilitation ensures greater control over the decision-making process in the livelihood of women farmers and leads to transformative decisions based on sound science. The creation of a community-based organisation will give women farmers greater visibility, recognition and support in the community and help them source resources (inputs, technology, and services like extension, credit and market and legal entitlements) more effectively. A community-based organization would also enable women to function effectively, both to develop themselves as farmers and thus provide for their households, and to develop agriculture in the region without encountering legal and social obstacles. MKSP serves as a platform for self-expression through sharing experiences and as a forum for peer learning. It also provides an opportunity for greater social participation and improves women farmers' self-confidence as is evident from the first-person accounts. The national programme which has been launched under the same name-MKSP perhaps marks the beginning of a new era where women farmers are identified as primary stakeholders in heralding a national agricultural revival.

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