

WOMEN WHO LEAD

SLADRC: BRINGING GENDER EQUITY AND EMPOWERMENT IN HIMACHAL THROUGH WOMEN FARMERS INTEREST GROUPS

Nearly 75% of the full-time workers on Indian farms are women, according to the international humanitarian group OXFAM. Female farmers produce 60% to 80% of the South Asian country's food. Women's work in agriculture is in addition to her role as a wife, a daughter-in-law and as a mother. However, gender-based discrimination continues in multiple ways: women are not recognized as farmers in Indian policies thereby denying them institutional supports from the bank, insurance, cooperatives, and government departments.

Meet Kamlesh Sharma, Helming the Change



Kamlesh Sharma is in her late 50s. Her face radiates with strength and she beams with confidence while introducing herself as the Pradhan of Arati Ek Hiti Samuha, a women Farmer's Interest Group of Kamaha village. Spin the time wheel five years backward and you would have met a starkly different Kamlesh.

Kamaha is a small village in Pachhad block of Sirmaur district in Himachal Pradesh. It has just 20 households in the village. The villagers of Kamaha depend on agriculture to earn their livelihood. They have farm-lands that spread over a five-kilometer radius surrounding the village. In total, the residents of Kamaha cultivate 50 bighas of farmland. Five families of the village belong to the scheduled caste community and three families fall below poverty line (BPL) category.

Himachal Pradesh is predominately an agrarian State where Agriculture provides direct employment to about 71 percent of the total population. It has a high reliance on agriculture which has a direct bearing from climate variations. While on the one hand, changing weather patterns and rising temperatures leave the farmers of the state vulnerable to crop losses, excessive precipitation, on other hand, destroys the crops.



About SLARDC

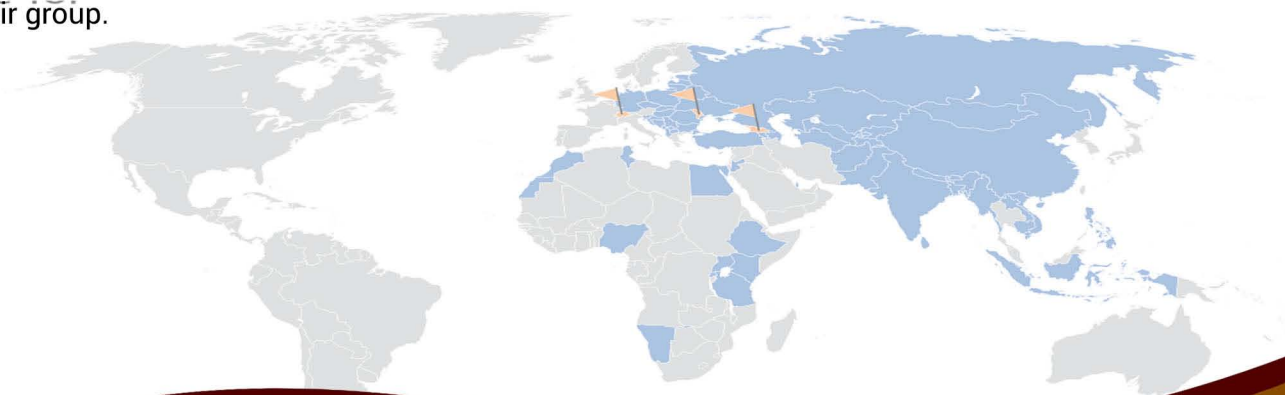


Sustainable Livelihoods of Agriculture-Dependent Rural Communities (SLADRC), a project funded through the National Adaptation Fund on Climate Change (NAFCC) and nationally implemented by The National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD) is an intervention aimed at promoting a combination of Climate Smart Farming Technologies along with required social engineering and capacity building process. In Himachal Pradesh, it is being implemented in the district, Sirmaur, by the Department of Environment Science & Technology. Under the intervention Farmers Producers Organization (FPO) and Farmer Interest Groups (FIG) were formed to ensure better income through organizations of their own. What started as an engine of bringing better income ended up bringing real change in the stature of women and mindset of people by the empowerment and gender equity through the women farmers groups.

Women farmers and producers, who are often excluded or have their participation restrained in organizations, face additional challenges, such as cultural and legal discrimination, which prevent them from accessing productive assets, finance, education, and technology. Establishing their own organizations or becoming more active in integrated organizations can help them overcome these constraints, increase their economic and social power and improve access to needed services. While women represent the majority of producers, they still are often concentrated in the less profitable stages of the value chain and struggle to engage in the value chain's more lucrative activities

PARTICIPATORY AND GENDER-SENSITIVE POLICIES AND PROGRAMMES ARE IMPORTANT FOR SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURAL DEVELOPMENT

Women face a lot of hardships in agriculture. The women in the village discussed these and formed group with an aim of dealing with the challenges collectively and constructively. Arati Ek Hiti Samuha was formed in 2018 with the help of Extension Officer who explained details about the project as well as the benefits of forming a FIG. A member of the group tells how the officer guided women of the village to form their group.



Arati Ek Hiti Samuha FIG: a vehicle of change and empowerment

"Before the formation of the group, we were facing many difficulties and dealt with them in our individual capacity. After the group came into being, all of us sit together and share our problems with each other. The problems we couldn't solve at our individual level are now getting solutions because we participate in each other's lives." Look closely and you can see how a simple participatory approach has helped the women in a great manner.

An elderly member of the group recalls with sadness about the days when the whole village had lost their garlic crops worth over one lakh rupees due to a drought in the region. They had planted coriander alongside the garlic during that time and it was all gone...destroyed. The group is actively working to build resilience to droughts. It must be noted that Himachal Pradesh is a state where agriculture is mostly rain-fed. The area of assured irrigation is not more than 20-25% as per the authorities.

Activities undertaken by the FIG

Micro-Finance: Arati Ek Hiti Samuha supports micro-enterprises operated by women with the help of micro-credit facilities. They lend money to fellow group members at a 12% annual interest rate. Borrowers are required to repay the money within 10 months. "At present we have loaned Rs. 40,000/- to our members. Women use this money to aid them in their farming. They pay the interest amount on a monthly basis that is 1% of the total sum borrowed."



Pine Leaf Coal: A member of the group proudly shows 'चीड़ पत्ती कोयला' (Pine leaf coal) to our team members. Kamlesh tells us that their FIG makes pine leaf coal during winters and sells those in the markets. They collect the fallen leaves, burn those in a drum and then crush it with bare hands to make a powder. They then mix fresh cow dung in the powder and process it in a coal-making machine to get the final product. They use 1 kg cow dung with 10 kgs of pine leaf powder. The FIG members also knit sweaters during the winter season and sell them in the market. These activities serve as an alternate source of income for the women of the village.

Manufacturing winter-wear:

"We have bought 10 knitting machines for the group. One machine costs Rs.5000/-and we have made an investment of 50,000/- so that we can have an alternate source of income. During the winters, women of the village finish fieldwork and household chores by 11 am and then get on with the knitting work until 4 pm.



Women showcasing winter-wear and the Pine leave coal they make

The FIG has helped tremendously in making the women of the village truly atmanirbhar. Now they don't have to ask anyone for monetary help. They have built a pool of money through the group from where they can borrow when they need any financial aid. "We are very happy to have formed this group as this has given us freedom from being at another's mercy for finance. We are determined to make it even stronger in the coming days," said a member of the group.

Way Forward



Group Members of Arati Ek Hiti Samuha

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Rethinking development by revisiting the role of women and their organizations in shaping the country's agriculture development is absolutely crucial. This means strengthening women and their organizations' capacity to articulate their positions and proposals and to participate actively in policy advocacy. FPOs and FIGs have proved themselves to be effective vehicles of change in local capacities to bring in self-reliance. These vehicles must be leveraged optimally and new ways of approaching the gender issues in agricultural and rural development must be adopted in order for men and women to equally participate and benefit.



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Government of Himachal Pradesh**