

Statement by Dr. Sarala Gopalan

Women can rise to an occasion. They need to be given an opportunity and access to information. Once they are equipped, they become great human resource. This happens on family farms all over the world when women step into the shoes of their husbands who have to migrate for work or sometimes become ill or die.

I want to give you an innovative way women have come into farming in a big way. These are women looking for livelihood and not necessarily from farming families. In a State in India, Kerala, 3.5 million women are members of Self-Help Groups, that take up all kinds of employment to earn some income to support the family. In recent years they have engaged themselves in a variety of civil works including water harvesting, repairing tanks, canals and irrigating systems and roads. They cast their eyes on lands lying fallow for years, as owners did not find it convenient to cultivate them. The women's groups negotiated with the land owners, took the land on lease and started working on them with guidance from senior farmers, extension agencies etc. The water sources they have augmented with their hard labour provided the water resources. They cultivate herbs for medicine, vegetables and flowers and cereals and have succeeded in bringing several thousands of acres lying idle. This could happen with the Government aiding them with agricultural implements, seeds, access to fertilizers both organic and chemicals and information on crops and markets. A well coordinated activity. This has been a great boost to agriculture in this part of the country, where women shied away from drudgery as agricultural labour. Their earnings have multiplied, debts paid off and their bank balances have increased. With this empowerment their status in society and quality of life has improved. The women see a lot of dignity in the work they are doing.

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