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Can Cooperatives Contribute to Women’s Economic Empowerment? A Case Study in South India

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Abstract

The Indian dairy cooperative system has around 13 million producer-members; mostly landless or small scale farmers with less than two hectares land. Village dairy cooperative societies provide an important mechanism to connect these disperse producers to the national dairy value chain and contribute to food security. In India, women typically perform most of the dairy-related production activities. Therefore, dairy cooperatives have a potential to benefit especially rural women and provide them with independent incomes and employment.

Our paper studies effects of women empowerment through cooperative membership. Since the year 1997 the Government of Karnataka and the Karnataka Milk Federation (KMF) established over 800 women dairy cooperative societies to economically and socially empower and benefit rural women in the State. We measure empowerment levels among 58 female dairy farmers of four different dairy cooperatives. Borrowing measurements from the Women’s Empowerment in Agriculture Index we discriminate membership and non-membership status in single-gender versus mixed-gender cooperatives. We find that in a context of rural poverty in which women-only cooperatives are promoted without offering additional development opportunities for men, the expected effects of these programs cannot fully unfold. Gendered power structures within the community and the household limit economic benefits for women. Depriving men from new income opportunities may even lead to stronger male household income control and reverse effects on the economic empowerment of female cooperative members. We conclude that many ongoing policies in support of women cooperatives may require re-evaluation. Development policies in support of women empowerment may have to target income opportunities and capacities of women and men in order to reach their goals.

Keywords: Cooperative organisation, dairy, development planning, empowerment, India