

Opening a green window of opportunity for widows of farmers

Most of them were unable to afford even one square meal a day

M.J. PRABU

Unlike government jobs, where the wife continues to receive pension after her husband's death, in agriculture, widows of farmers are not so lucky.

"Once a farmer dies, the burden of supporting the family falls on his wife. With little or no education, and a poor financial background, it is a tough job for a single woman, especially in a village, to overcome the several odds and succeed," says Mr. Velan (mob: 98652-78018), Director, Velicham, (member of Leisa network), Pudukottai, Tamil Nadu.

Incidence of widows

Kottrapatti village in Pudukottai district is like any other village in the country. But the incidence of widows in this village and surrounding areas is quite high.

Having lost their husbands, the ladies were finding it difficult to carry on with their daily work and also take care of their children.

Most of them were unable to obtain one square meal a day or send their children to school. They were neglected and in some cases sexually exploited by some male members in their village.

Working out a plan

"During our routine field visits we happened to hear about the plight of these widows through one of our staff. We decided to talk to the women and draft a plan which will help to them," says Mr. Oswald Quintal (mob: 9842449125), Director, Kudumbam (NGO), Tiruchi.

Accordingly, Kudumbam staff visited the village and spent several months inter-



UPLIFTMENT: Some of the widow beneficiaries with Mr. P. Ramadass, Co-ordinator, Kudumbam, Tiruchi, Tamil Nadu. — PHOTO: M. J. PRABU

acting with these women. Initially some of the widows wanted to migrate to towns in search of work. But the responsibility of having to care for their children kept them back.

Group forming

"We realized that all of them had a good knowledge of farming as they used to help their husbands in the field. We decided to buy some land and entrust it to their care," says Mr. P. Ramadass, training co-ordinator, Kudumbam.

The idea was well received because it was familiar work for them and they did not have to leave their village and familiar surroundings.

"We took about two acres of wasteland on lease and started guiding the women (about 15 members) as to what crops to grow and what inputs to use.

We impressed upon them to grow millets and pulses which require less water," says Mr. Ramadass.

The women were also trained to produce their own

organic inputs. Kudumbam staff visited them weekly to guide and encourage the group.

"I lost my husband, a chronic alcoholic, seven years ago, and found it difficult to take care of my three children. With no money and work

"I did not know what to do for food. I even contemplated suicide, but backed out at the last moment because of my children.

"But today my life is better, thanks to Kudumbam. My two children are going to school and I am able to lead a decent life," says Mrs. R. Maruthambal, a beneficiary.

One more

Another beneficiary, Mrs. M. Pakkiyam, says:

"After my husband died in an accident 5 years ago, my in-laws chased me out of the house labelling me a misfortune.

"My parents were also not keen to take me back as they had three other daughters who needed to get married. I turned into a vagabond over-

night with no food and shelter. If not for these people I would have killed myself." At present there are about 15 women in this group and all of them are taking active interest in the work.

Harvested produce

A portion of the harvested produce is kept for food and some is saved for sowing in the next season. The rest is sold and the income is equally divided among all the members.

In order to increase the economic development of the women, a revolving fund of Rs. 20,000 has been created.

"Members can avail loans from this fund and repay it in easy monthly instalments. In fact, this fund has reduced their dependency on private moneylenders who charge a heavy interest which ranges from 40 to 60 per cent on the loans," says Mr. Ramadass.

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