**Women Dairy Cooperatives: Empowering women for nutrition security**

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Dairy Cooperatives are an important component of organized milk markets in India. The main aim of the Dairy Cooperative movement in the country – since its inception - has been to organize farmers so as to gain bargaining power to extract better terms of trade from downstream purchasers. Organizing smallholder producers and pooling their produce and provision of critical inputs has been the cornerstone of cooperative marketing to exploit the resources of the farmers and realizing genuine economies of scale. The network of Dairy Cooperatives has expanded considerably since the launch of Operation Flood program in 1970. There has been an eightfold increase in their number and a sevenfold increase in their membership since 1980–81. During this period, milk procured by Cooperatives increased from 935 thousand tonnes to 6.381 million tonnes. As proportion of total milk produced, it increased from 3 per cent in 1980–81 to 7.9 per cent in 2004–05. India commands number one position in total milk production in the world, dairy cooperatives as also the Indian women have significant contribution in this success story.

One of the unique features related to dairy husbandry scenario in India is the prominent role of women in dairying. Women play pivotal role in domesticating animals and more especially almost all activities in dairying are performed by women in India. About 70 per cent of workforce in the animal husbandry sector comprises of women. Dairying, thus, has been considered as one of the most appropriate enterprises suitable for them in villages. Recognizing the predominant role played by women in dairying, need was felt to establish a separate dairy cooperative network specifically catering to the needs of rural women. To utilise dairy co-operative societies as means towards economic and social improvement in the status of the rural women, the Rajasthan Women Dairy Project (RWDP) was launched in 1991 under the Support to Training and Employment Programme for Women (STEP) of Ministry of Human Resources Development, Government of India. The women dairy cooperatives formed in many states under the STEP have made significant positive changes in the socio-economic profile of rural women as evident by a number of studies including by the authors.

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The Women's Dairy Cooperative Leadership Programme (WDCLP) was launched in 1995 in Valsad, Kolhapur, Wynad and Goa in Western India. The main objective was to strengthen the dairy cooperative movement by significantly increasing women's participation as active members and as leaders in the governance of cooperative societies, unions and federations. At the village level, the key strategy was to train and position a local woman as a resource person to encourage and support women's involvement in their dairy cooperative.

Women dairy cooperatives have been considered as effective means to empower rural women. The Woman Dairy Cooperative network has expanded since the inception and so far thousands of rural women have been benefited from this project. As on June 2001, there were 10,492 all Women Dairy Cooperatives in India (www.nddb.org). Over 41 lakh women are now members of dairy cooperative societies and 2.5 lakh women are elected leaders in their village dairy cooperatives. Besides, 265 women are elected to the board of milk unions and 2 milk unions namely Ichhamati Milk Union in West Bengal and Mulukanoor women’s mutually aided milk producers cooperative milk union in Andhra Pradesh have evolved as all women dairy cooperative completely managed by women. These dairy cooperatives have brought out a lot of socio-economic transformation in the lives of women. Table 1 gives a bird’s eye view of the beneficial impact that the Women Dairy Cooperative movement has had on the rural women community.

**Table 1: Status of women members of Cooperative dairy project before & after**

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| --- | --- |
| Before formation of WDCS | After the formation of WDCS |
| There was lack of organization among women | They organized themselves |
| Lack of self confidence among women | They came out from the four wall of their home, now more confident |
| There was less awareness about the social evils and were victim of the social evils | They started understanding the social evils. There was a change in the thought process |
| Lack of literacy | Have understood the importance of literacy. Some have learnt to put their signature |
| Lack of thrift habit | It has generated the thrift habit |
| They were not able to decide about their well being | Started thinking about their well being |
| Were not competent in taking decision | Decision making ability improved |
| Were not aware about the values of cooperation | Understood the Value of cooperation and reaping its benefits too. |
| Were pouring milk to private vendors | Could understand the consequence of pouring milk to the private vendors |
| Were not the members of the society | Became the members of cooperative and started treating the society as their own |
| There was no interest in the leadership development programme | Developed the interest in the leadership programmes. The self confidence and leadership quality generated |
| Less importance to general cleanliness of animals | Started paying attention on the cleanliness of self and their animals |
| Were unaware about the prevention against the animal disease and vaccination programmes | Gained the knowledge of prevention of disease and vaccination |
| Were not aware about the nutritional value of milk and milk products | Came to know about the nutritional value of milk and milk products |

**Household level impact of Women Dairy Cooperative Movement: a case of Uttarakhand**

Although, there are distinct benefits of participation in Women’s Dairy Cooperatives, it is a matter of debate among various stakeholders in the dairy sector in regard to whether the impact of this movement has been uniform across different regions of the country. The newly created state of Uttarakhand is bestowed with rich livestock resources. Uttarakhand has about 2.19 million cattle, 1.29 million buffaloes, 1.16 million goat and 0.3 million sheep. Cattle thus constitute the major share of livestock population in the state (44.6%), followed by goat (20%) and buffaloes (10%). Milk constitutes the major livestock product and account for 77% of the total output from the livestock sector. Over 80 per cent of all livestock species and cent per cent of indigenous poultry population are owned by small holders (landless agricultural labourers, marginal and small farmers). Livestock is thus considered to have high prospect to enhance the level of living of the poorest of the poor.

U.S. Nagar district falls in the Tarai region of Kumaon Divison of Uttarakhand. The district is one of the only two plain districts of the state and is rich in livestock resources. The district accounts for 5.66 per cent and 14 per cent of total cattle and buffalo population of the state, respectively. Dairy husbandry forms a source of livelihood for almost all the rural households of this region and thus, the dairy sector is considered to have high prospects in uplifting the status of the rural population. The district also has significant share of the network coverage of the state milk marketing federation. U.S. Nagar ranks first in regards to the number of functioning Dairy Cooperative Societies (DCS) (436) in the state and ranks second in regard to average annual milk procurement by Dairy cooperative network (29, 862 Kg/annum) and number of DCS members (24, 480 DCS members).

To ascertain the factors influencing membership of Women’s Dairy Cooperative Societies (WDCS) and examine the role of such Cooperatives in socio-economic empowerment of rural women, a study was undertaken. Three WDCS were selected, one each from three strata, viz. low, medium and high milk procurement societies. A total of 46 households were selected from villages covered under these Cooperatives, having equal representation from member and non-member households. Structured interview schedule was developed keeping in mind the objectives of the study for collection of data, incorporating available scales/measures, tools and techniques for measurement of various dimensions selected under the study.

**Factors influencing participation in WDCS**

Age of household head and gender of household head were the variables that significantly influenced membership in WDCS. Probability of being a member of WDCS increased with decrease in age of household head, i.e. younger respondents were more inclined to participate in this type of cooperative society. Households which were headed by females were more likely to participate in WDCS.

**Impact of WDCS**

*Impact on women empowerment*

Member respondents in WDCS had greater influence on their colleagues and peer groups as compared to non-member respondents. Members in Women’s DCS had performed better in ensuring that whatever is advised by them is followed by most of the members. Regarding the entrepreneurial attitude of respondents, it was found that the members of WDCS were more risk loving and thus had a more favorable entrepreneurial orientation than their non-member counterparts.

In member households of WDCS, proportion of households in which the female family members took decisions pertaining to most of the dairying activities was significantly higher than that in which the male members were major decision makers. However in case of non-member households significant difference regarding decision making pattern in terms of proportion of households’ with a female decision makers was observed only in case of few dairying related activity. The findings thus revealed that in WDCS, the females of households had more roles to play in decision making pertaining to dairying for member category than females of households of non-member category.

*Impact on economic parameters*

Significantly higher proportion of households of member category adopted new technologies than that of non-member category in WDCS. However, there were no significant differences in regard to milk production, productivity and milk retained for home consumption across member and non-member households. However, marketed surplus in terms of percentage of total milk produced was higher for member category (72%) than non-member category (64%), implying that level of commercialization was higher for the former category. Members in WDCS received higher price per liter of milk as compared to the non-members, however the difference in prices received was not statistically significant.

Landholding size significantly and positively influenced dairy farm income in case of villages covered under WDCS. The positive influence of landholding on income from dairying probably suggests the complimentary relationship between crop and dairy production. However, cooperative membership as such did not influence dairy farm income.

*Constraints in scaling up dairy production*

The various constraints pertaining to dairying were high cost of fodder seeds, high cost of cattle feed and mineral mixture and unavailability of green fodder throughout the year among feeding constraints; poor conception rate through artificial insemination as major breeding constraint; poor knowledge about health care practices most important health related constraint; lack of market information and non remunerative price for milk among marketing constraints; negligence and dishonesty of employees, lack of cooperation and coordination and political interference as the major organizational constraints; unavailability of credit when required as the major financial constraint.

**Summing up**

To sum up, the present investigation revealed that favourable impact of WDCS was felt more on the household level social parameters than the economic ones. Regarding decision making, entrepreneurial attitude, and leadership ability of respondents and adoption of improved dairy technologies, substantial differences were observed between member and non-member households of both types of DCS. The females of households had more roles to play in decision making pertaining to dairying for member category than non-member category. Evidence also emerged that the members of WDCS had a more favourable entrepreneurial orientation and leadership ability than their non-member counterparts. On the other hand, participation in cooperatives did not significantly affect dairy farm income. Thus it can be concluded that dairy cooperatives had played a significant role in social empowerment of resource poor dairy farming community in general and rural women in particular. The women once organized through institutions like dairy cooperatives could get motivated to produce more milk towards ensuring nutritional security of the country.

**Vision for the future**

The experience gained by the women members of DCS may lead to their assuming higher responsibilities in managing the DCS and milk unions. Once gaining experience as member of dairy cooperatives, they would move into governance aspects like participation in management committees and milk boards. This would make women’s role more proactive and visible in food production and their quality of life would be improved leading to empowerment of women and well being of whole nation. The experiences of these women dairy cooperatives may be utilized by other developing countries to ensure food and nutritional security around the world.









