

Strengthening women farmers' role in sugarcane value chain

Introduction:

Globally, India is the second largest sugarcane producer, contributing to about 10% of its agricultural GDP (Solomon, S. 2016. Sugarcane Production and Development of Sugar Industry in India. Sugar Tech., 18(6)). Female employment in agriculture in 2018 stood at 55.38% (ILOSTAT database, September 2018). According to the 2011 census, the agriculture sector employs nearly 98 million women, with about 63% of them serving as agricultural laborers (DownToEarth, Defeminisation of Indian agriculture, 8 March 2018). Yet, their contribution remains undervalued – especially in sectors such as sugarcane farming, which are perceived to be male-dominated.

Challenge:

DCM Shriram Limited is one of India's largest business conglomerates, with a strong focus on agribusiness in rural India. Much of its sugarcane produce comes from Hardoi, Uttar Pradesh, one of the poorest, most patriarchal, and most disadvantaged districts in the country, with 66% of its population living below the poverty line. Hardoi has an agriculture-based economy, with sugarcane as the main cash crop.

Although women actively participate in the sugarcane value chain, their work and contribution are often overlooked. Women's work is labor-intensive and frequently concentrated at the very start of the value-chain, such as in weeding or planting. Sugarcane farming is often perceived to be a male-dominated activity--so training and programs that allow farmers to increase their yield and income are often not targeted at women. Male farmers typically have assets registered in their name, resulting in the exclusion of women farmers or farmers' wives from accessing credit, markets, or becoming members of farmers' networks. Women also tend to have limited economic access both within their community and outside because of restrictive social norms and care responsibilities toward the well-being of elders, children, livestock, and other assets.

Intervention:

Under the Meetha-Sona-Unnati program, DCM Shriram and IFC, in collaboration with Solidaridad Network Asia and Coca-Cola India, developed an approach to build the capacity of farmers, to increase agricultural yield and conserve water and soil health. DCM Shriram and IFC developed specific solutions to increase the visibility of the work done by women farmers and their impact on improving farm yields:

- DCM Shriram and IFC identified key operations where women laborers and farmers are the dominant workforce on ground. The project applied the Women's Empowerment Agriculture Index, an innovative measurement tool to diagnose areas of disempowerment of women in agriculture and design development programs to address those areas. This assessment marked a significant shift from earlier gender-blind analysis and enabled the project team to create targeted trainings for women farmers on improving their skills and knowledge.
- Based on the findings of the baseline on women's roles and crop yield barriers, the project team hired a female trainer to hold training sessions for women on mechanization, entrepreneurship, and financial literacy. To address low participation, wider outreach and

convenience, especially for women farmers, the team brought in a mobile van to deliver the trainings closer to farmers' homes.

- This effort was further complemented by focus group discussions with women in the villages, to strengthen their role and participation in the sugarcane value chain.

Impact:

- Trainings for more than 1,000 women in the classroom and mobile vans on Good Agri Water Management Practices (GAWMP) have led to an increased yield (of 25 percent) in the DCM Shriram production catchments.
- The yield increase translated into increased income for the farmers, often doubling their existing income.
- The trainings encouraged women to take on larger and less labor-intensive roles in the agricultural value chain (such as, learning how to operate farm machinery).
- Some sessions were conducted for both women and men together. Such trainings demonstrated how they could work together despite the gender-segregated culture.
- DCM Shriram and IFC along with other key partners are now exploring how to enable more than 10,000 women farmers in the sugarcane growing region to participate in dairy farming, as an additional income generating activity.

Source: IFC, Gender Smart Business Solutions, Strengthening women farmers in DCM Shriram's Sugarcane Value Chain, May 2019