



Svalorna
Indien Bangladesh

Stories from The Millet Sisters



Who are the Millet Sisters?

The Millet Sisters is a network containing small-scale women farmers from 15 organizations around India, who all work with organic millet farming and women empowerment. The network aims not only to achieve food security but food sovereignty as well. This includes the right to healthy and nutritious food, preserving their cultural heritage and sustainable livelihoods. Through their hard work women farmers as well as whole millet-growing communities have been strengthened. They have also achieved increasing policy support for the inclusion of millets in the public food systems.

Women from the following organizations within the network were interviewed for this booklet: Deccan Development Society, Agragaamee, Nirman, Sarada Valley Development Samithi, Pilupu and Sabala.

Why do they focus on millets?

Millets are a group of small-seed grasses that are cultivated as food for both humans and animals, most commonly grown in semi-arid tropics of Asia and Africa. Millets are one of the oldest foods known to humanity and one of the first cereal grains cultivated for domestic purposes. Before the green revolution millets were one of the main crops cultivated in India, but since then the agricultural sector has focused more on other crops such as rice, cotton and sugarcane.

Millets are known for their high tolerance to extreme weather conditions, such as drought. Compared to other cereals the cultivation of millets requires far less water. These characteristics make millets a beneficial crop for farmers facing climate change. Millets also come with great health benefits as it contains high amounts of beneficial vitamins, minerals and nutrients. Its short cropping season makes it a great alternative for highly populated areas fighting malnutrition, as you can harvest several times per year.

Anjamma from the village Gangwar

Anjamma was born and raised in the village Gangwar in Telangana. She remembers how the women within the village 40 years ago were not able to own land. Instead they worked for landlords, where the payments were insecure and the women were not involved in any decision making. The landlords also owned all the seeds, which made the women dependent on them. A change began to take place in the village when women groups were formed. They gave the women farmers a place to come together and exchange their knowledge and seeds, a method commonly used by the Millet Sisters network for empowering women. In Anjamma's village the groups are called Sangham, which means community in the local language.

“Sangham made us smarter. Collectively we understood that we could demand better conditions. We realized we could have a better life.”

Today the women in her village own their own land where they can grow their own crops. The landlords have become dependent on the women instead for good and high yielding seeds.



The sisterhood in the village Madaspaju

Life as a millet farmer can be challenging with long days and a lot of hard work. In the hills of Odisha the women farmers overcome these challenges by relying on each other. They have created a community where they look out for one another. They spend their days together, helping each other in their fields and taking care of each other's children. The community stretches beyond the millet fields to all aspects of life. As food is a big part of their culture, they always cook together when a holiday or festival is coming up and then gather all their families for the feast. If someone in the community becomes sick the rest of them take care of the person by making sure he or she gets enough food and medicine. These women are one example of a strong sisterhood found within the Millet Sisters network.





Srawani from the village Sirisipadu

In a mountainous part of Andhra Pradesh, 26 years old Srawani lives with her family. Her 7 acres of land is mostly used for millet farming, in particular finger millets (ragi). Every morning Srawani and her family of eleven people eat ragi malt, which is a porridge consisting of flour she makes from her own ragi.

“Not eating ragi malt makes me feel like I haven’t taken my medicine.”

In many Millet Sister communities they have shared flour mills so that the women don’t have to travel long distances to make flour out of their millets. To the flour Srawani adds water, milk, jaggery, almonds and cardamom to complete her favorite breakfast dish.

Saraswati from the village Gollalapalem

Not all Millet Sisters work in the millet fields, some sisters also run the organizations that support the farmers. Saraswati is such an example, as she in 2005 started to work as a manager of Sabala, one of the organizations within the Millet Sisters Network.

She describes how the organization in the beginning observed a lack of food security in the villages. Although the people there had their own land they didn't use it to grow their own food. Saraswati saw it as a consequence of an inadequate relationship between the people and their land. Where the knowledge of how to grow food, and especially millets, had been lost. She has since then worked to rebuild these relationships and helped people start with millet farming through economical support and knowledge exchange. Sabala also arranges food festivals to spread awareness about the benefits of millet farming.

“As a result of our work, we can see that the relationships between the people and their land has been strengthened and the millet production in the villages has increased.”





Ramya, Manjula, Mogulamma & Kamalamma from the village Rustapur

Traditionally the farmers of Rustapur used to live off their millet fields, something this generation of farmers also strives to do. Because knowledge of millet farming has been lost over time and a variety of new challenges have appeared, the women now struggle to cultivate millets to the same extent. The women explain that one of the main challenges for them are the changing patterns of the monsoons. Following climate change the rains now come too late, too early or not at all. This makes it difficult to know when the right time for sowing is. The changing climate brings many difficulties for the farmers, but through the Millet Sister Network they get support, advice and share knowledge and resources with other farmers which makes them hopeful for the future.

Mouglamma from the village Potpally

In her little blue house, Mogulamma lives with her two children. She started with millet farming through her mother in law and has since her husband passed away taken care of the fields and the children by herself. She is well known in the area for successfully growing over 20 different crops in the same field. This method of farming is called intercropping and is in contrast to monocultures where only one crop is cultivated. She describes millet as a women's crop and she sees a difference between the agriculture of men and women.

"In my area I see mostly women growing many different crops in their fields, while the men grow only cotton or sugarcane. I think men's idea of agricultural development is through increasing their financial income, while women have a closer relationship with food. For women money is not the focus, but instead a healthy and varied supply of food for us and our families."





Harvest season in the district of Rayagada

During harvest season the women farmers in the district of Rayagada work long days. Before sunrise, they wake up to cook all the meals that will be consumed by themselves and their family for the day. They then pack their lunch into metal containers and make their way to the fields. After they have harvested all the millets, they put it to dry in the sun. When it's dry enough they can start the threshing, which is done to loosen the edible part of the grain. Often the sun has set behind the mountains before they have arrived back home. As a result of their hard work, they are self-sufficient and can cook their traditional millet meals every day.



Mothi Bhai from the village Lachunayak Thanda

With her five children and ten grandchildren Mothi Bhai lives in the village Lachunayak Thanda. The family belongs to the tribe Lambada, who historically were nomads and not practicing any agriculture. Since a few generations back the tribe has settled down and Mothi Bhai and her family have been farmers their whole life. She describes how farming for them is not only practical work, but has also become a big part of their culture. They participate in many agricultural festivals, where they perform rituals to bring higher yields for the upcoming season. Although a lot has changed within the tribe and they have adapted a new culture, they still preserve their old culture. By dressing in their traditional clothes, performing with the tribe's dances and songs and using their own language.





Narasamma from the village Algole

Besides millet farming, an important part of Millet Sisters is making their own voices heard. Often villagers, especially women, are marginalized and not listened to. The network is trying to change this by educating themselves in movie making, producing their own documentaries and broadcasting radio shows. One of the millet sisters who is most active in the media work is Narasamma. Her work takes her to different parts of India where she visits Millet Sister communities to record their stories and thoughts. Because of her talent for producing documentaries, she has also been requested to record movies in many other countries around Asia.



Chandramma from the village Bidakanne

To make sure the farmers can be independent from the market and themselves decide what crops they want to grow, the network has started seed banks. Many women now have seed banks in their home, but there are also communal seed banks managed by the organizations. Through these banks the farmers can borrow and exchange seeds and also store varieties of traditional crops they want to protect.

One of the women who works at a communal seed bank is Chadramma. Although she can't read or write, others describe her as a walking encyclopedia. She is active in teaching the younger generation about holistic farming, seed preservation and the value of traditional seeds.

“Agriculture is what keeps me alive, it’s my life. I love the seeds, I love the soil and I love other farmers. I love to speak to others about what I love.”

This booklet highlights the work, lives and sisterhood of the women within the Indian Millet Sisters network and is a result of a four month internship at Deccan Development Society in Pastapur, India. The internship was made possible through the Swedish organization Svalorna Indien Bangladesh.

With the purpose of spreading awareness of the many climate, health and food security benefits that millets bring, the year 2023 has been selected by the UN as “The International Year of Millets”.

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