

Women and collective action: lessons from the Indian dairy cooperative sector

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Abstract This article scrutinizes key effects of women's empowerment through cooperative membership. Since the 1980s, over 3000 women-only dairy cooperative societies have been founded in Karnataka, India, with the objective of economically and socially empowering women. First we review the broader literature on gender and collective action in a development context and then empirically assess empowerment levels among fifty-eight female dairy farmers in Karnataka. We discriminate between membership and non-membership status in women-only versus mixed-gender dairy cooperatives and compare empowerment levels among those groups, borrowing categories from the Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index. We find that, in a context of rural poverty in which women-only cooperatives are promoted without offering additional development opportunities for men, the empowering effects remain limited to increased leadership abilities. Cooperative membership as such does not automatically enhance women's control over income or their intrahousehold decision-making power. In fact, members of women-only cooperatives perceive themselves as having even less control over dairy income and productive decisions compared with unorganized female dairy producers. These findings suggest that collective organizations in the dairy sector which systematically exclude men may fail to increase women's empowerment at the household level. At the same time, women face entry barriers to participation in mixed-gender cooperatives. We conclude that policies in support of women-only cooperatives and female members in mixed-gender cooperatives may require more rigorous evaluation.

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