INTRODUCTION

The Commonwealth of Learning (COL) is promoting Life Long Learning (L3F) for Farmers with an objective to improve the livelihood security of the illiterate and semiliterate poor women and men farmers through knowledge empowerment for the last five years. Open and Distance Learning (ODL) with the support of modern and affordable ICT tools, the mobile phone has been used to support the learning process. The vision of the initiative is to evolve a self-replicating and self-sustaining programme in Lifelong Long Learning among Rural community using modern ICT harnessing the social capital. The major goals are to facilitate a process and system of “Life Long Learning” in rural community leading to knowledge empowerment, particularly among women and other poor sections of the community, to support the translation of such knowledge empowerment into livelihood security and to use the modern Information and Communication Technology (ICT) for facilitating such a process. Using ICTs, the project aims at building the capacity among farmers, and landless labourers which could help them in developing value-added farming, encourage more sustainable use of natural resources, strengthen their ability to face globalization, and ensure food and livelihood security. It visualizes its role as a facilitator of a fresh concept for self-sustaining, self-replicating programmes such a perspective necessitates the participation of various stakeholders with a framework of “win-win situation”. The important partners in such an initiative is the banking sector with a focus to rural credit, telecommunication providers for mobile phone based voice mails, and community based organization facilitating the women’s collectives. The interventions is trying to address the poverty and livelihoods (2008-till date) through creating access to technology mediated learning, credit and institutional linkages to enhance their skill and knowledge in increasing the productivity of the existing livelihoods, asset building and move in the ladder of empowerment.

The various impact assessment of the intervention showed that there is an increase in the productivity and the total income generated ( L3 farmers Rs.44,407, non L3 farmers Rs.24,133). The bank has certified that the repayment rate is 100% and more than 50% of the farmers repaid the entire loan in advance, this helps the farmers to apply for the second loan and got sanctioned. After the repayment the average value of the goats owned by the household is Rs.1, 20,000 (Thamizoli and Balasubramanian, 2012) and NIBM (2013).

The present research paper made an attempt to study the impact of the L3 activities i.e economic and knowledge empowerment among women and men learners in brining the changes in gender relations

PROJECT SITE AND APPROACH

The project is being implemented in two different sites in Tamil Nadu. Reddiyarchatram Sustainable Agricultural Producer Company Ltd (RESAPCOL), and Kulumai SHG federation Kannivadi, Dindigul district are the two implementing partners. Nearly 800 farmers (30% of them
are women) are shareholders involved in crop cultivation and dairy in the RESAPCOL whereas in Kulumai federation, 2200 members belong to agricultural labourers and small farmers involved in dairy, goat, bioinputs preparation etc. Apart from mobile phones, print and web based ODL mode is used to facilitate the learning process. Each learner has obtained credit from bank for buying goats, cows, poultry birds and a mobile phone. It provides voicemail based learning and information for these women on a daily basis. They also exchange views among themselves using mobile phones and discuss key points in their monthly group meetings. For the mobile learning both the partners are collaborating with AIRTEL-IKSL services for mobile based learning. Of the total members, 280 from RESAPCOL and 530 from Kulumai have become L3 learners since 2009-10, belong to 43 groups.

The intervention process adopted gender sensitive approach in project cycle approach; from planning to monitoring and evaluation. Here Open and Distance Learning with the support of modern and affordable ICT tools; the mobile phone especially voice mail and print media has been used to support the learning process. Appropriation of mobile and print technology to facilitate credit specific learning process and livelihoods, institutional linkages, creation of assets and access to production related technologies and services were specific strategies adopted to reduce gender gap and progress towards transformation.

Gender relations: The division of labour shows that men and women share the different activities in agriculture and management of livestock especially dairy cow and goat are the primary responsibility of women. Women work involved drudgery and long hours. Men’s role in domestic context is very limited. The daily routine of women shows busy round the clock schedule, which makes them unable to spare more time for productive or paid services and activities including enterprises and new livelihoods. Men have spare time to rest and indulge in recreational activities. Regarding access and control over means of production women have access to several things excluding credit and technology but no control over any of the major means of production resources like land, water and livestock. Men has exclusive right over prime properties such as land, house etc. Women's access to sources of information as well as the technology is poor and absolutely limited access and control over market. The process of decision-making differs on different issues, but on some vital aspects women are completely ignored. Dissent by women during the discussion is never encouraged. Decision-making at community level is men's affair women are totally excluded from it.

METHODOLOGY

The study used qualitative methods such as Focus Group Discussions and participant observation to collect the data and information. On the qualitative methods three tools were employed i. time use to understand the current gender roles and workload interms of productive, reproductive and community work, ii) gains and losses with a focus to ten indicators (related to role change, change in the attitudes, personal empowerment and others) to assess the changes in gender relations and iii) institutional linkages to find out the changes in the interaction space and access to relevant institutions. In all the three tools the information on current and previous status (prior to 2007-08) was recorded through recall method. Of the 43 groups, eight groups (covering 92 learners) were selected for the study with due representation to caste, class and age of the group.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

I. Time use studies: Dairy (dairy – one or two cows) is the main economic activity taken up by women members in addition to the primary livelihood activity of the household like agriculture or
wage labour. The agricultural calendar starts with Sep- Oct season which is the peak season for the agricultural work, and the members get more employment. The remaining months are lean season for employment. The nature of the gender roles among men and women in agricultural labour section as well as farm households indicates that the more labour intensive, time consuming tasks are carried out by women whereas men from the farm households are more of supervisory in nature in agriculture and involved in additional/secondary occupations. The men agricultural labour are taking up village based agricultural tasks and during the lean season they migrate to nearby towns. Women leisure/rest time is lower than men in both agricultural labour and farming households and work burden is higher for women than men. The new enterprise diary or goat was completely managed by women, seen as an extension of domestic work. Women accept the increased work burden because the outcomes like self confidence, sense of reduced dependency etc are more important to them.

II. Gains and losses:
Work/Leisure: Women felt that workload have increased in cattle management, number of working days (now on an average 20 days and earlier it used to be around 10-15 days in a month), group meetings etc that reduced their leisure. However, women perceive that easy access to credit ensures women’s interest, participation and cooperation as a positive factors inspite of increasing workload.

Skills and Knowledge: Opportunity voicemail, training on group account management, bank linkage, interaction with government and other officials, dairy management especially disease management, feeding and feed preparation has provided women a sense of confidence and ownership. The ability to analyze, questioning, negotiating, bargaining and confidence to meet any difficult conditions got increased among the members of both agrl.labour and farm women. The members have acquired new skills in the areas of bank transactions and group management, interaction and negotiation capacity with the officials, and confidence to go to any place on their own and animal management and insurance. Mobility has increased their confidence, courage and knowledge and access to information like bank, govt. dept. These linkages helped them to contact them independently and have established a good relationship. Initially men resisted their mobility but gradually seeing the benefits emerging due to their interaction like taking the responsibility in home and credit management, children education, etc they accepted and helping them among the labour households.

Responsibilities: There has been a change and realization that women’s role is widened in the family irrespective of the groups. Responsibility is increased for women in home management, to go for work as well as external activities like going to the ration shop, and other govt. offices to get signatures and applications, to avail govt. schemes, children’s education, and loan repayment. Of late men request women to go to functions in the relative’s houses due to their confidence to go individually. Both men and women said that women consult or take consent of men to take the loan mainly to involve them in the repayment responsibility.

Public Participation: Women’s roles in public welfare activities are visible in the village now a days among both agricultural labour as well as farm women groups. Both the sections are actively participating in the activities like making public transport facility, primary school and Primary Health Centre to their village by visiting the appropriate departments, drinking water problem, desilting of community pond, drainage, street dog menace etc. The other important role of the women’s group is solving the conflicts/problem within the house, between houses etc (mostly among the group members) in both the cases. The above activities are non-controversial and helpful to all. These activities are not really challenging the prevailing gendered power structure in the community.

Opportunities: Opportunities for income generation have been happening at the individual level in both labour and farm households. Irrespective of the class, many of them purchased goat, cow or increased their multiple livelihoods in the areas of floriculture, vegetable and fruit cultivation, and invested in their business like coconut retailing, cattle feed, tailoring, printing press and grocery shop to enhance business etc. Due to these activities the role of private moneylenders has drastically reduced, also it helped to bring down their annual interest rate from 60 % to 36 %. The saving by the poor women and cash in hand gives secured moral feelings at times of emergencies especially among agricultural labour sections.

Decision making: According to women in both sections admits that now they participate in the decision making process by involving themselves in the activity as well as giving suggestions, it is mainly due to the increase in awareness that they can participate or having equal rights to participate in the decision making process. Slowly the joint decision making is coming in the
family and women feels that it is mainly due to their economic contribution to the household and confidence they are gaining.

Assets: Generally after the involvement in SHG activity irrespective of the class and gender expressed that there is an increasing trend in asset building in each of the households. Many of them purchased house/renovated, livestock, jewels, Television, redeemed pawned assets, two wheelers and savings in bank and Insurance. Number of members has been able to support their children’s education apart from purchasing above-mentioned assets.

Status: With regard to social prestige every household in a village has a representation in SHG through women and thus being in a group doesn’t make any changes in the village in both the classes. But among the relatives front it increased. It helped to enhance women status especially among farm households among other men in the same community, local institutions like milk society, coordination committee of the temple, school, anganwadi and panchayats. Earlier men never recognize the strength of women and involve them in common activities. The members feel that it is primarily due to the income earning opportunities as well as money in the women’s control.

Conflict/violence: Women of both labour and farm households developed an ability to discuss, argue, counter argue with men of the household. Thus oral conflict has increased in both labour and farm households. They also expressed that gradually arriving consensus has increased, and physical violence within the household are decreased. The other point mentioned by women especially among agricultural labour households in dalit community that the peer pressure/support of other women members of the group resulted in decrease in the conflicts and violence. Women say that now men are thinking and afraid to beat wife or take up conflicts.

Caste: Most of the SHG members are from same caste (homogeneity), but the clusters and council has representation from heterogeneous communities (represented by different caste like SC, BC, MBC and OC). The resistance to sit together and interaction at the village level still persists. But when they go out it was replaced by the feeling of group solidarity. The council/cluster meetings are conducive in breaking the caste and religious barriers. At the village level though numerous inter-caste conflicts occurred, women SHG’s sorted out and built the relationship through continuous meetings and discussions between both the parties.

The gains and losses exercise indicates that workload is increased for both women and men and especially for women due to the peer pressure to repay the loan. The members have gained new skills (analyze, negotiate, bargain), knowledge and linkages with new partners. The roles and responsibilities for women increased both at domestic and external activities and playing a catalytic role in family management. In the family always women consult men to take the loan mainly to involve him in the repayment, both jointly own responsibility to repay the loan. Inspite of their increased workload and their role in family and economic contribution, at the community level they could take only soft roles, still men retains control. Though men encourages women to take up community work/tasks which are not really challenging the prevailing gendered power structure in the community. The group activity in general reduced the role of moneylenders and brought down the interest rate in the village from 60 to 36 %. There is a general awareness among women on their participation in decision making process with in the family and slowly their role is increasing in the process. Generally there is an increase in the levels of assets to each of the family and status of women among relatives has increased. The conflicts in the family have got reduced and violence has decreased both in the farm and labour households and SHGs are acting as a pressure point to share and reduce it in case if it arises. The discussions indicate that irrespective of the class the perceived value of SHG is functional and access to loan is the primary reason for the SHGs.
iii. Institutional linkages: There has been a tremendous change in institutional linkages. Women from the agricultural labour and marginal farmers category recognized on an average of eight institutions in the past and around 15 institutions in the present context. The women and men irrespective of the class and caste immediately identified bank as their primary and the most important institution in the present day context. The Perceived value of SHG is very functional. Next to bank, IKSL-airtel, RESAPCOL, milk society and Public Distribution System (PDS) in the present was prioritized as important institutions. Irrespective of the class, women expressed the need for bank, IKSL, PDS and milk society, since they are directly responsible to provide and ensure availability food to family.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Access to technology mediated learning, credit and institutional linkages created new opportunities to enhance their skill, knowledge in increasing the productivity of the existing livelihoods and move towards knowledge and economic empowerment. The changes in the knowledge and economic empowerment necessarily bring changes in the relations between men and women. At the individual level, in mental and physical side there was greater expansion for women by way new opportunities and exposure in knowledge and skills and expansion in institutional space. In the context of empowerment it is called as ‘power within’ which makes women fell more confident and helps to reach the ‘power to’ which makes women as a active participants and control their income and asset and actively participate in making decisions.

References
