

From Participation to Empowerment: A Case Study of Women's Changing Roles under the CRIWMP in Dry Zone Cascade Systems

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Women in the Dry Zone of Sri Lanka, play a major role in agriculture, contributing to farming, livestock management, household food security, and water-related activities. However, this role is often undervalued. This study explores how the Climate Resilience Improvement and Water Management Project (CRIWMP) contributed to women's empowerment, with a focus on the Thuduwakkaikulam Cascade. This study was conducted as a qualitative case study. Primary data were collected by Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), Key Informant Interviews (KIIs), and field observations which involved female farmers, farmer leaders, and vulnerable women. Focusing on the dimensions of resources, agency, and achievements, the analysis was conducted with the guidance of Kabeer's empowerment framework. The findings showed CRIWMP interventions increased women's access to productive resources, reduced labour burdens related to accessing water, and diversified livelihoods through home gardening, groundnut cultivation, poultry rearing, and small-scale enterprises. This strengthened women's agency through the formation and enhancement of women-based community organizations, which provided access to training, low-interest credit, leadership opportunities, and collective decision-making. Multidimensional empowerment happened through women-led enterprises which generated off-season income and created local employment opportunities that helped in financing children's education and improved household resilience. Vulnerable women achieved independence in finance, and their mental well-being and social recognition within their families and communities improved significantly. Overall, the study showed that gender-responsive, climate-resilient water management interventions can drive empowerment. By integrating livelihood support, capacity building, and inclusive institutional mechanisms, CRIWMP contributed to transforming women's traditional roles within dry zone agricultural systems.

Keywords: Climate-resilient agriculture, Community-based water management, Dry zone cascade systems, Rural livelihoods, Women's empowerment