

# How one woman reached out to 500, raised an agro company

Author - Shaju Philip , Published on - 10.12.2018

**Yasmin is now the managing director of Thennala Agro Producing Company, which has 374 women farmers as shareholders who are engaged in paddy cultivation as well as marketing the 'Thennala' brand of rice.**



[Yasmin \(right\) with farmers in Thennala, Malappuram.](#)

[\(Express photo\)](#) TILL ABOUT six years ago, Yasmin Arimbra was a school dropout who had never even been to a bank. Today, the 35-year-old manages an agriculture produce company, helms a special school for differently abled children, and is pursuing a graduate degree. But then, Yasmin's story of change is not about her. It's about how she took 500 other women along with her in this remarkable journey from conservative Thennala panchayat in Malappuram, a Muslim-majority district in north Kerala, to the headlines of the local newspapers. Yasmin is now the managing director of Thennala Agro Producing Company, which has 374 women farmers as shareholders who are engaged in paddy cultivation as well as marketing the "Thennala" brand of rice. "Many criticised me, asking whether a woman should engage in such activities. I did not pay attention to these protests from orthodox elements in my community. Also, men from the villages under our panchayat scoffed at our paddy cultivation because they saw it as a loss-making activity," she says. These days, it's not just the "men from the villages" that are applauding Yasmin and her band of women. Says James George, deputy general manager, National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD), Malappuram: "This achievement under the leadership of Yasmin is remarkable. From housewives, they have become farmers, entrepreneurs and decision makers of their company." Yasmin traces the turning point to 2012, two years after she became a member of Kerala's Kudumbashree Mission, an umbrella collective of women self-help groups working with the state government for empowerment and poverty eradication. "In 2012, I was elected chairperson of the panchayat-level unit under Kudumbashree. At the time, it had 500 women as members but none was engaged in any productive activity. Besides, with most of the men employed in the Middle East, the region had vast tracts of uncultivated paddy fields," says Yasmin. "In early 2013, I took the women into the fields. Most of them were from BPL (below poverty line) families, and they were put into 126 clusters with each unit having four members. They were asked to take 1-3 acres of paddy field on lease from owners for cultivation," she says. "By 2013, we had managed to get 126 acres of land... that grew to 522 acres. The project was backed by the local office of the Agriculture Department, the district office of NABARD and the Kudumbashree district mission," says P Sarojini, another shareholder in the company. In September 2015, Yasmin and her associates floated Thennala Agro Producing Company. "When raw paddy was being procured by private rice mills at rock-bottom prices, we thought why can't we process the paddy into rice and sell in the market," says Yasmin. The company subsequently raised Rs 4.5 lakh with the face value of each share pegged at Rs 1,000. The Kudumbashree Mission chipped in with Rs 10 lakh, NABARD put in Rs 9 lakh over three years. And women farmers were made the members of the board of directors. "Farming, running the company... it was a new experience. We grew along with the company. Like Yasmin, I was a school dropout but I got training from the Cochin University of Science and Technology (CUSAT) on management skills," says Sarojini, a former board member. This change is visible out in the fields, too — and in many other lives. Company records show that in the latest harvest season, Thennala Agro Producing Company paid Rs 24 lakh to 500 women farmers for the cost of paddy. "I joined the equivalent of Class 10 under the state literacy mission and cleared the exam. I have since cleared the Class 12 exam and joined a degree course in Sociology under a continuing education programme," says Yasmin. "Earlier, I was just a housewife. But farming has changed my life. We were reluctant to come out into the public sphere. Now, we have gained confidence as there is financial independence and interaction with various people. All the jobs in the company are done by its members," says Hajira Syed, who cultivates 25 acres with seven other women. Says Hemalatha C K, Kudumbashree district co-ordinator: "When Yasmin became the chairperson in 2013, Thennala panchayat had the lowest rank among our 110 panchayat-level units, called Community Development Societies, in Malappuram. Now, the CDS at Thennala is at the top in the district. It is the result of one woman's struggle against heavy odds over the years." Yasmin, meanwhile, went one step further in 2013-14 with Blooms, the first and only special school in the panchayat. "Many of these children were abandoned by their fathers. Often, their mothers have to leave them inside locked houses before stepping out. But with support from philanthropists, we are taking care of 36 children now," says Yasmin. First published by

**The Indian Express**

on Dec. 10, 2018