

Beyond the field: Women leading the way in mushroom farming



Women mushroom farmers and Star Mushrooms staff

In Sri Lanka, women contribute significantly to agriculture but largely in the form of unpaid labour. They are less engaged in commercial farming models and agricultural entrepreneurship.

Some of the barriers women face in becoming commercial farmers include low levels of land ownership, limited access to markets and resources and limited engagement with financial services and technology. Women also bear a disproportionate amount of unpaid household and care responsibilities, which limit the time and opportunities to participate in commercial agriculture.

Why mushrooms?

In 2021, MDF's scoping work identified mushroom as a crop that women could grow easily in their back gardens and enter commercial farming. Backyard farming models give women the flexibility to balance household responsibilities with farming, while also supporting entrepreneurship. Despite this potential, there was little awareness among women on commercial-scale mushroom cultivation, buyers were not sourcing consistently from backyard farmers and prices were volatile. In addition, mushrooms have a particularly short shelf-life, which require specific storage facilities and transportation methods.

MDF's partnership with Star Mushrooms, a business specialising in the production of value-added mushroom products, has had a transformative impact on a large cluster of women farming mushrooms. In 2022, MDF partnered with the business, which is led by Indira Kumari and her daughter Nimesha, to build a business model based on direct farmer relationships and supporting farmers with technical advice. MDF and Star Mushroom found that women were eager to join the farmer network, as it provided a stable income while allowing the women to work within the environs of their homes – mushrooms are grown in makeshift 'huts' outside

the house. MDF's support to Star included streamlining its operations and management processes, allowing Indira to focus on working closely with women farmers.



Spores of success

Sanjeevani Sepalika, a farmer from Galagedara in the Central Province, traces her interest in growing mushrooms commercially to a school project that taught her mushroom cultivation. A nursery teacher, Sanjeevani felt the brunt of Sri Lanka's 2022 economic crisis as her students dropped from 15 to 5 as parents found it increasingly difficult to afford nursery education.

Sanjeevani learned about Star Mushrooms' training on home mushroom cultivation, which motivated her to shift to mushroom farming. She takes pride in her entrepreneurial skills in growing her mushrooms in two huts – she used her savings for the first hut and the income generated from that to build the second. She dedicates three full days to "pot making" – the process of setting up the mushroom grow bags. The bags are packed with a growth medium, which is a mix of sawdust, seeds, rice polish and soya. Trained by Star Mushroom, Sanjeevani builds

up the bag, sterilises it by steaming and then introduces the mushroom spores. She spends two to three hours a day managing the mushroom huts.

In 2023, Sanjeevani increased her production to as much as 120 packets every week (each packet is 200 g), generating revenue of LKR42,000

(AUD209) every month. While she continues to be a nursery teacher, the mushroom farm has become the primary income source for Sanjeevani's household. Despite the cost of living in Sri Lanka gradually increasing, Sanjeevani remains determined to expand her knowledge and purchase new equipment and machinery.



Over the past year, the income from mushrooms has been crucial to support my children's education and settle loans. Mushroom farming has brought me immense mental satisfaction and reduced my stress because now I have cash at hand for my children's needs. I don't need to deny them anything. Today, mushroom farming has become a meaningful household activity that involves everyone, bringing us together.

Sanjeevani Sepalika,
Farmer



Lead farmers showing the way

MDF also supported Star Mushrooms to implement a new incentive program for lead farmers, to ensure fair compensation for advisory services, collection and transportation services within farmer clusters. A designated lead farmer would oversee operations within a farmer cluster, with sub-collectors providing guidance to the farmers and collecting the mushrooms. The approach enhanced efficiency and helped Star Mushroom easily distribute resources, such as inputs for grow bags, among its farmer network. The model of using volunteers from the community as sub-collectors built trust among the farmers.

Kumudhu Navaratne is a Star Mushroom lead farmer from Nikaweratiya, in the North-Western Province. She attended Star Mushrooms' training on hut preparation, cultivation, drying, packaging, pest management and the use of new growth mediums, conducted with MDF support. Kumudhu's improved understanding of farming practices allows her to support other farmers in her sourcing cluster. Holding the role of lead farmer for over a year, she oversees the work of six to seven fellow farmers and three part-time workers. Her mushroom cultivation has expanded: having started with a modest crop of 1,000 mushroom grow bags, Kumudhu now tends over 3,000 bags. To ensure consistent success each season, she regularly makes new pots, generating an average monthly sale of LKR81,470 (AUD265).

Star Mushrooms' work with MDF has resulted in its farmer base increasing from 36 in early 2022 to 220 in 2023 and revenue surging by nearly 200 per

cent in 2023. Notably, 80 percent of farmers supplying to Star Mushroom are women. Access to continuous knowledge and a guaranteed buyer has enabled the women to contribute to household income, with an average profit of LKR138,360 (AUD680) per annum per household. For many, mushroom farming has become the primary source of household income amid Sri Lanka's crippling economic crisis. This income has enabled women farmers to improve their social standing within their communities, as lead farmers were recognised as drivers of economic advancement and contributors to village events.

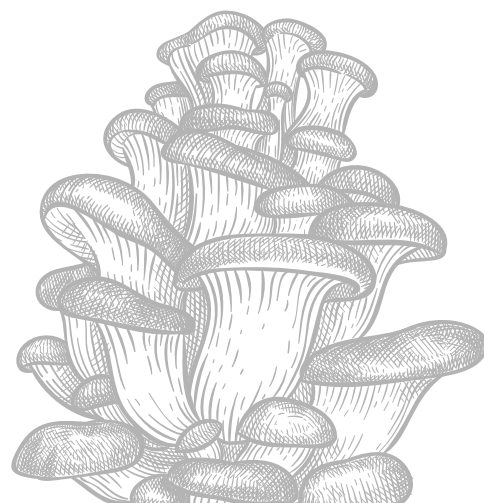
Kumudu and Sanjeewani attribute their income stability from mushroom farming to the support provided by Star Mushrooms. By creating a transparent and encouraging work environment for women farmers, Star Mushrooms has empowered its workforce and instilled in them the confidence to take on leadership roles within their communities.

The new sourcing model is also a win for the business. Expanding its sourcing base has given Star Mushrooms the volumes necessary to scale up to develop a value-added product. With the goal of building their farmer network to over 1,000, the business will continue to support farmers with information and reliable market access. For women, this is an opportunity to emerge as successful entrepreneurs in the agriculture sector.



The farmers I've assisted have expressed gratitude for the opportunities I provided them to earn an income that supports their livelihood. It has also provided me with great mental strength, as it brings me personal satisfaction to be there for others. I am thankful to Star Mushrooms, as cultivating mushrooms has evolved into our primary source of income, especially considering that my husband is also visually impaired.

Kumudhu Navaratne,
Star Mushroom lead farmer



Climate-responsible investments

Mushrooms are grown in makeshift enclosures, or 'huts' – a protected environment that controls for temperature. As a result, both Kumudhu and Sanjeewani noted the crop's resilience to shifting climate patterns. The women mention that their success in mushroom farming stands out as a climate-friendly investment compared to other crops, given the usual impact of rainfall on harvests. This sustainable farming method has enabled them to have a steady income stream, as their crop thrives consistently in a cool environment within the huts, unaffected by unpredictable rainfall or sunlight patterns.