

Scaling heights with ease and elan

A women's collective of coconut tree climbers in Palakkad is at ease with their job

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SREEKRISHNAPURAM

Swaying coconut palms and men climbing them to harvest the fruit is a common stereotype associated with Kerala, one seen widely in tourist brochures about the state. Now this stereotype is about to get updated, as women are entering what has traditionally been a male occupation.

Until recently, V.P. Sreeja (36), a seasonal agricultural worker from Poochottukavu near Sreekrishnapuram, used to toil in the paddy fields. But now she is much happier, having joined Kerala's first all-women collective of coconut tree climbers. The



A woman being trained at Palakkad. ■ K.K. MUSTAFAH

Sreekrishnapuram Block Panchayat floated the collective to plug the gap after the traditional coconut tree climbers, all men,

moved to other, higher-paying jobs.

"We always thought of it as a male occupation involving huge risk. But the climbing machine has made our work easy. I climb 50 trees on good days. We get paid ₹100 per tree," said Sreeja, adding that the work generates a steady income round the year.

Her sentiments were echoed by Kamala Devi, Komala Valli, Jayasree, Radha and Ammini, all of whom became members of the collective over the past month. The services of the women climbers are only a phone call away and available on all days. The calls are distributed among the collective's members.

"Initially we requested the traditional male climbers to get trained in the mechanised mode of plucking. But they turned us down saying that they can earn more outside the profession. It was then that we thought of training women," said P.

Aravindakshan, president of the Sreekrishnapuram Block Panchayat. Though they had never climbed trees before, the women needed only four days of training, which was provided at a centre in Ottappalam, under the auspices of the Mahila Kisan Sathikaran Pariyojana.

"My job is done by mid-afternoon. The earning is pretty good as well," said a beaming Ammini.