



Women Friendly Coconut Industry – a Swot Analysis

Introduction

India is one of the major players in the coconut trade accounting 22.34 per cent of the world's coconut production. Currently the crop is grown in 1.89 million ha with an annual production of nearly 13,000 million nuts. Copra processing, coconut oil extraction and coir manufacturing are the traditional coconut based industries in the country (Choudhary and Thomas Mathew, 2004). In India women constitute 48.15 per cent of the total population and it is reported that a majority of economically active women (78 per cent) are engaged in agriculture compared to 63 per cent of men (Padmanabhan, 2001). She is multifaceted and carrying out several activities at home and farm as food producer, wage earner, farm labourer and caretaker. Plantation sector, which is intimately connected with women's farm and household activities gently hovering her not mere as a farm worker but as an entrepreneur. Since coconut industry is women- friendly, potentially growing and rapidly diversifying, priority should be set for assessing the opportunities it provides for women empowerment and ultimately the sustainability in the farm front.

Women participation

If we give a little thought about the contribution of women to the coconut industry it is astonishing and heartening to see how much she is intermingled within this sector and silently enriching the economy as a hidden work force. Her participation is not realized in the right sense and due recognition was not given so far. In almost all activities starting from production to consumption, the role played by women is worth mentioning. She involved herself either as labourer or as farmer in selection of quality seed nuts, sowing, raising seedlings, watering, weeding, nursery management, plant protection, manuring, intercultural operations, harvesting and post harvest technologies.

In the coconut industry, especially in Kerala, Andaman- Nicobar and Lakshadweep Islands where the crop is inseparable with the family traditions and culture, women's contribution is enormous. The women who remain at home taking care of the households as well as the farm adhering to it such as collection of harvested nuts, dehusking, shelling, copra drying, milling, oil extraction and oilcake preparation, etc. They are earning from coconut leaf plaiting, broom making and rural crafts preparation. Drudgery involved in these works is less and it is in accordance with the posture and temperament of women. Women doing coir composting, coir matting and coir rope making is a regular site in Kerala, which is carried out efficiently by even old women from time immemorial.

Product diversification is a wonderful mantra in the plantation industry. She is preparing delicacies out of the tender and matured nuts, sweet inflorescence sap and running small- scale units. Coconut shell products mostly produced by women are fetching more prices in the market. Most of the Asian countries like Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand and Philippines have

more women workers in their coconut gardens. Women involved in family care as mothers and housewives have enough traditional knowledge on nutritional aspects, organic cultivation with kitchen wastes, preservation and storage of some of the products. Their knowledge should be acknowledged, appreciated, scientifically proved and documented.

Strengths

- The availability of wide range of agro-climatic regions, gene pools of coconut, skilled human resource, traditional and modern production and processing technologies altogether provide this sector a special status in Indian economy and also women who involved in it.
- Availability of high yielding varieties enhanced the quality of the end products. Viable technologies on nursery management, irrigation, balanced manuring and coconut based farming systems encouraged women cooperative units and self help groups to adopt them, which increase profit and ultimately enrich the confidence in farm women.
- Internal market is very strong for coconut with reference to raw nuts for culinary purposes and oil as hair oil and body massage oil either as such or in medicated form and as industrial raw material. As much as 48 per cent of the coconut production is used for edible and religious purposes. Toiletry sector is the major consumer in India, which engaged lots of women employees. Even massage parlours run by women are operating in tourist centers especially in Kerala and Goa.
- Increasing population is always giving a solid demand. Income and consumption power has been



increased considerably with regard to processed and packed foods.

- Post harvest management, processing, storage and utilization of horticultural produce and products are generally the domain of women at home scale. Value addition, product diversification and by-product utilization has been given top priority in the recent years due to the WTO regimes by developmental agencies under ministry of agriculture and commerce. Coconut industry will gain from these regimes and women too as entrepreneurs.
- Export is an existing desirable option particularly to Gulf countries, which are flooded with Keralites who are still the major consumers of coconut and coconut products.
- Apart from the traditional products like copra, coconut oil and desiccated coconut some other products are being manufactured in small scale. Ball copra, coconut jaggery, vinegar, coconut shell based handicrafts, shell powder, shell charcoal, activated carbon, coir pith briquettes, coconut cream, spray dried powder and skim milk are the new products, which have just started appearing in the market in a limited way. These technologies are now being utilized by women self help groups and mahila associations.
- CFTRI is in forefront developing technologies for diversified coconut based products like coconut inflorescence sap RTS, CIS honey, toffee, jam, cakes, granulated sap, jaggery, sweet wine etc. (Giridharan *et al.*, 2004). All these processing technologies possessed best quality and shelf life, which are women friendly and easily learnt through appropriate training programmes.

A number of devices for harvesting, dehusking, processing operations have been evolved by CPCRI and KAU. Demonstrations exclusively for women on these equipments are initiated.

- The coir industry provide employment to 0.575 million workers with women constituting about 80 per cent of the work force. Likewise toddy tapping and related activities engage 0.15 million workers in the state.
- Spices like black pepper, cardamom, vanilla, clove, nutmeg, kokum and garcinia grown in coconut gardens give produce for consumption and it is suitable for diversification to earn more returns from coconut plantations (Parthasarathy and Kandiannan, 2004). Women involved largely in spices cultivation and taking up the drying, sorting, grading, packing works, to be precise all the processing activities. It is their hands, which is adding value and flavour to the final product.
- Research network between government organizations like Indian Council of Agriculture Research, Directorates, All India Coordinated Research Projects, Commodity Boards like Coconut Board, Coir Board, Universities, State Departments and Krishi Vigyan Kendras provide more scope in coconut management and women development.
- Recruitment of women scientists, researchers, teachers and extension workers was improved in sufficient numbers not only in the plantation crops but also in all the horticultural crops. Without any hesitation or hindrance women farmers can approach women scientists for any clarifications in the farming amidst of existing social taboos. In Kerala, the Central

Government Institutes are more and have more women employees in accordance with their population ratio.

- Institutions such as Kerafed, Marketfed, Defence Food Research Laboratory, Regional Research Laboratory, Directorate of Economics and Statistics etc. are involved directly or indirectly in the integrated production, procurement, processing and marketing of coconut, which altogether speed up the development process for the benefit of women and unemployed youth in the country.
- In the Horticulture curriculum separate on farm trainings are given to both male and female students by putting them in the fields for hand in hand practical experience in plantation management. Girl students are equally performing better in the management and other crop production courses revealing the fact that women are also equally able.

Weaknesses

- Unproductive old senile palms.
- Price fluctuations.
- Limited acquaintance to the processing technologies.
- Competition from multinational companies.
- Conflicts in partnership of land, access to resources, credit, decision making in the programming, marketing, storage, exchange of seed materials and benefit sharing are the important areas of gender issues listed by National Research Centre for Women in Agriculture. These controversies should be sorted out in the correct perspective.
- Wage disparities still exist in the



farm between men and women for equal amount and hours of work.

- Education and training is needed for any socio economic improvement. Illiterate women cannot survive with children if at all anything happened to their counterparts. Education will activate ability, nourish the knowledge and reduce their dependency on others. Goals should be streamlined towards increasing women literacy rate.

Opportunities

- The area, production and productivity of coconut showed steady increase, which pave the way for more research and development activities specific to women providing employment opportunities and entrepreneurship.
- Agricultural modernization has made a definite impact on farmwomen in India also on their income, expenditure pattern, behavior, time utilization and quality of life. This change has already started showing gain in the pattern shifting of more and more farm women towards horticultural enterprises.
- On the research front dwarf varieties make the management easy for women.
- Intercropping, multispecies cropping system, mixed farming concepts are an added advantage in coconut garden (Rajagopal *et al.*, 2004).
- Intercropping with anthurium, heliconia, orchids, jasmine, marigold, tuberose and some foliage plants is a highly paying business (Rajeevan and Valsalakumari, 2004). Flowers have a regular demand for religious offerings, flower arrangements and festivals. It is therefore not only flourishing field in commercial and export markets, but has vast

potential of employment to the tune of 215 to 365 man days/ ha/ year giving additional returns to the farmers and women in particular. Already women started taking up this venture.

- Shade loving fruit crops, medicinal and aromatic plants can also be grown as intercrops. As ayurvedic treatments are gaining importance, medicinal plants are now being grown in large scale and coconut farming become an evergreen opportunity.
- Kitchen garden will be a better option for women as she is the caretaker of the family. The nutritional aspects and season of growth of several vegetables if made known to her by trainings she can provide nutritional security not only for her family but can sell the vegetables to others also. Trials with amaranthus, bhendi, brinjal and gourds were proved at CPCRI that these could be cultivated in the coconut garden.
- Garcinia is being processed and utilized in Kerala in large amount for garnishing fish curries. Nutmeg pods are being pickled and used which has medicinal properties for stomach ailments. Kokum is being used for juice preparation especially by the women groups. Women started participating in vanilla cultivation in the recent years and also earning from the preparation of cuttings, which is providing good profit.
- It is the women who do most of the milking and feeding of the animals (Vandana, 1991). So part of mixed farming system in coconut, dairy, poultry, rabbitry, apiary and fishery has been successfully tried and recommended for adoption, which are women friendly and highly remunerative.

- Ever increasing demand in highways, railways and airways for tender nuts provide sufficient opportunity for women to enter into this business by running tender nut parlours and sales counters for other products.
- Matured coconut water in the production of different produces, food and health drinks had good product acceptance. Coconut honey has application in the preparation of many other traditional food items and in therapeutic uses. All these technologies are encouraging endeavours for the empowerment of women.
- Wealth from waste – Farm wastes like stem, leaves, petioles, spathe, bunches, husk, coir, coir dust are used for vermicomposting and mushroom cultivation, which has an increasing demand.
- Organic cultivation with effective utilization of farm wastes in coconut plantations improves the environment and aesthetics leading to enhanced health, wealth and economy, happiness and pleasure at work for women.
- With change in people’s attitude in favour of natural ecofriendly materials, the plantation industry is slowly regaining its importance.
- Quality seed material availability is the need of the hour. Women can take up seed industry by producing hybrid seeds. This enterprise is coming up well with private companies producing more seeds and seedlings. Their efficiency can be utilized in the pollination and hybridization works in dwarf palms and in nursery management. There are coconut nurseries run by women in Kerala along with ornamental plants.
- Women can prepare handicrafts and artifacts from coconut, which



has demand among local and foreign tourists. As women are blessed with patience, it will enrich the artistic mind and creativity, which will give a peace of mind under stressful conditions. Both rural and educated urban women utilize this opportunity.

- Export performance of coconut and its products in world scenario shows that 88 per cent of the total value of exports is contributed by kernel products. Among these coconut oil alone commands 64 percent of the value of exports and 12 per cent by desiccated coconut. The other kernel products like copra, oil cake, etc. account for 15 per cent and the rest by coir and coir products (Rethinam, 2001). It is a great opportunity for coconut industry.
- Timber processing technology and coir products tremendously increased the marketing potential (Nair, 2000).
- Export value of coir and coir products from India during the last year was 303 crores. The country pin its hopes to increase its export earnings mainly from coir, the demand that is on an upward trend as a natural fibre. The uses of coir are also diversified and ranges from coir fibre to geotextiles, rubberised coirs, fibre pots etc. (Rethinam, 2001). Ultimately women who engaged in the coir industry are the beneficiaries.
- Coconut Development Board has been playing pivotal role and its concerted efforts in enhancing farm level income through productivity improvement and other production measures, product diversification and subsequent demand creations for the new products have resulted a dynamic push to the industry for its sustained growth (Choudhary and Thomas Mathew, 2004).

- The National Co-operatives Development Corporation (NCDC) accord a high priority to the development of post harvest management of horticultural crops and a dozen societies are in operation for marketing in the country. NAFED marketed horticulture produce and products to the tune of Rs.314.61 crores in 1995-96 (Pandey and Ghosh, 2000).
- Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), World Bank, Asian Development Bank and non governmental organizations effectively involved in the funding for any developmental activities for women in the developing countries. Research priorities were given for gender studies and reorientation of research and developmental activities with the sole aim of empowering women in the farm front and enriching entrepreneurial skills.
- Technology Development Board assisting the industrial concerns involved in development and commercial application of indigenous and imported technologies (Krishna, 2004). Loan assistance and grants are being given by them. All these efforts highlight the various opportunities waiting for women folks.
- Girls are now getting equal shares from their parents like male child, the ownership of land holdings should be legalized which will be in the advantage of women who is willing and interested to take up coconut farming and any entrepreneurship related to the crop. Eventhough dowry system is debilitating it should be diverted, reformed and utilized for the benefit of women.

Threats

- Unstable prices in the market for

the produces. Ratio of domestic and world prices for commodities indicate the degree of export competitiveness, which is very low for coconut. Liberal import due to pressure from multilateral agencies like WTO may lead to depressed domestic prices and consequently lower profits.

- Biochemical studies questioning the health aspects and nutritional value of coconut oil.
- Incidence of pests and diseases.
- Cost of labour, fertilizers and plant protection chemicals.
- Gender issues are being taken as bias or conflict between men and women. Better understanding and equal distribution of responsibilities and benefits is needed.
- Besides this the fragmentation of family had given enormous workload to women as home managers. Women in India cannot be isolated from home as such, so women in coconut sector are to be considered in totality (Balaguru, 2000).
- The adoption of different trades by women depends upon locality, social taboo and access to resources and knowledge and gentle long-term approach is needed to overcome the barriers (Hema Pandey, 2001).
- Several constitutional and legal provisions do exist to safeguard the interest of farm women. In spite of these provisions the farm women continue to be neglected and often exploited because of faulty implementation and biasness against women.
- Lack of well planned detailed study on women's participation and contribution. Pandey and Pareek (1990) however have made an attempt to give an account of this



aspect. It should bring about positive changes in the long run by enhancing equal participation of both men and women.

Conclusion

A real concern for the contribution of women in coconut production, technology generation and use is important for the improvement of this sector. There is an urgent need for documentation of role of farm women in farming activities, technology dissemination process and other gender related issues. These invisible farmers should be brought to the vicinity of research managers and policy makers for effective empowerment measures in the coconut industry. Women participation should be promoted, their knowledge and skill have to be enhanced through education and training. The agencies interested in the well being of women should be made aware of existing constitutional provisions available for providing equality, opportunity and protection to women. Women's efforts and hidden contributions if recognized, surely coconut industry will become profitable and sustainable.

References

T. Balaguru. 2000. Gender issues in agriculture. NAARM lecture no.9, Hyderabad, p.20-23.

M. L. Choudhary and M. Thomas Mathew. 2004. Coconut Industry in India: Issues and Perspectives. Abstract of National seminar on strategies for enhancing competitiveness of coconut

industry held at Bangalore, July 17-18, p.15.

M. P. Giridharan, Jomy Jacob, K. Abdul Kareem and K. N. Satheesan. 2004. Products from sweet toddy. Abstract of National seminar on strategies for enhancing competitiveness of coconut industry held at Bangalore, July 17-18, p. 17.

Hema Pandey. 2001. Role of rural women in agriculture. Abstract of national seminar on gender issues - women in agriculture and management, August 20- 22, TNAU, Coimbatore.p.131.

S. B. Krishna. 2004. Activities of Technology Development Board. Abstract of National seminar on strategies for enhancing competitiveness of coconut industry held at Bangalore, July 17-18, p. 37.

M. K. Nair. 2000. CPCRI -Vision 2020 document, Kasaragod.

B. S. Padmanabhan. 2001. Women empowerment in farm sector. *Yojana*, January 2001, p.47-50.

V. A. Parthasarathy and K. Kandiannan. 2004. Spices under coconut. Abstract of National seminar on strategies for enhancing competitiveness of coconut industry held at Bangalore, July 17- 18, p.4.

R. M. Pandey and O. P. Pareek. 1990. Horticultural production technologies for farm women. In: *Women in Agriculture technological perspective*. (Eds.) C. Prasad and Sri Ram.

S. N. Pandey and S. S. Ghosh. 2000. Gender issues in horticulture. In: *Plantation crops of Kerala - Challenges and options*. Eds.KUK Nampoothiri, VA Parthasarathy, ARS Menon and HH Khan, p. 173-185.

C. Prasad and T. Balaguru. 1994. Recommendations of the national seminar on women in agriculture and developmental issues. National commission for women, International Federation for women in agriculture and NAARM, Hyderabad, India.

V. Rajagopal, C. Palaniswami and C. V. Sairam. 2004. Coconut based cropping system for sustainable income generation. Abstract of National seminar on strategies for enhancing competitiveness of coconut industry held at Bangalore, July 17-18,p.1.

P. K. Rajeevan and P. K. Valsalakumari.2004. Commercial ornamentals as intercrop in coconut gardens. Abstract of National seminar on strategies for enhancing competitiveness of coconut industry held at Bangalore, July 17-18, p. 4.

P. Rethinam. 2001. Coconut industry in India, CDB Publication.

S. Vandana. 1991. Most farmers in India are women. Food and Agriculture Organisation, Regional Office, New Delhi, India.

S. Elaine Apshara
 Central Plantation Crops Research Institute,
 Regional Station, Vittal, Karnataka- 574 243.

To the Attention of Contributors

Contributors of articles in *Indian Coconut Journal* may kindly follow the regulations of the Board for their publication. • The article should be sent in soft copy in Ms Word format • Photographs along with the article should be given in Tiff Format Resolution 300 • Hard copy has to be submitted in duplicate • Graph is to be in Excel Format • Tables, illustrations, photographs, etc. should be cited in the text appropriately • It should be sent through the Head of the Institution to get it in full proof.

Those articles which do not follow the regulations will not be accepted for publication.

Editor