

WOMEN IN SPICES INDUSTRY- CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

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In India, women constitute 496 million (48.3%) of total population (1028 million) and it is reported that a majority of economically active women (78%) are engaged in agriculture compared to 63 per cent men. According to 2001 census 32.9% of them are cultivators and 38.9% are agricultural labourers. Kerala, the land of spices, where women population is more, have a share of 4.8 and 21.5% respectively. Spice crops cover an area of 25 lakh ha with an annual production of 29.07 lakh tonnes, valued at about Rs. 7,000 crores, and involves much labour force both men and women. Major spices are being grown as component crops in the plantation sector where women folk are largely employed. It is a very common sight to see women working in coconut, rubber, coffee and tea plantations, involving themselves actively in various cultural operations. Eventhough, women contribute much as a work force to the spices economy the real facts on their roles have not been studied so far. It is necessary to recognize and record the influence women have on spices industry especially in this era of women empowerment and gender issues.

Contribution of Women

Generally post harvest management, processing, value addition, product diversification, storage and utilization of horticultural produces and products are considered as the domain of women at home scale. But from production to

consumption, from farm front to factories the role played by women in bringing out the end product is worth mentioning. It is her hands, which are adding flavour and value to the spice products. Spices and condiments are being used for savouring, seasoning and imparting taste and aroma in foods. The quality of final product, consumer preference and acceptability depend upon the drying and processing of spices at correct moisture level without loss of color, flavour and taste. Women do all these major processing activities from time immemorial and it is clear from the venue of these factories. The export economy of spices is being enriched by this hidden work force. We never recognized the real hard work this group of women are putting in for garnishing the spice products. Women are involved in farming as a labourer or as a farmer in selection of quality seeds and seedlings, pot mixture preparation, sowing, watering, weeding, nursery management, plant protection, manuring, intercultural operations, harvesting and post harvest activities.

Most of the Asian countries like Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand and Philippines have more of women workers in their plantations and processing units. In the traditional belts where the spices are mixed with coconut the participation and involvement of women are incomparable. In our country also in Kerala, Karnataka, Andaman-Nicobar, Lakshadweep Islands and North Eastern

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states most of the home gardens have multi species cropping systems and the women who remain at home are taking care of these crops very efficiently. Along with domestic chores women enjoy working in their gardens because it involves less drudgery compared to other field crops. The processing works are in accordance with their physical and mental make up and even elderly women are doing the drying and other curing works with ease and efficiency.

Role of Women

1. Major spices

It is a routine in Kerala where women do despiking of harvested pepper by trampling with legs, drying under sun, spreading the grains in the morning and collecting them in the evening. Green and white peppers, pepper powder, oil, oleoresin, pepper in brine are the value added products and these are obtained from the processing industries where majority of the operations are done by women. Cardamom harvesting, drying, splitting, curing, bleaching, oil preparations are some women friendly activities and they are delivering their duties sincerely. Vanilla is a recent introduction, which has changed the outlook of spices industry. Various cultivation practices, pollination works, cuttings preparation are being taken up by women farmers and housewives in the vanilla gardens.

2. Tree spices

Apart from the farm activities, women separate harvested clove clusters from the stems consisting of peduncles and pedicel neatly. Drying may take about 4-5 days to produce clove bud of desirable color and during drying raking from time to time to ensure uniform color is very important and it is being done by women. Clove bud oil still has a good demand in tooth paste industry and so extraction units may be a new venture for women to explore. All the procedures involved in the

Nutmeg seed and mace extractions, drying, grading, packing and storing are carefully followed by the dedicated women labourers in the estates. In Cinnamon processing, stripping the bark, loosening the inner bark by rubbing briskly with heavy brass rod and preparing quills will decide the quality of the product. Here too the batches of women cure the product.

Betel vine known as pan is considered as a valuable commodity with an annual turnover of leaves worth Rs 800 crores. It covers an area of 50,000 ha and is grown as a cash crop in Andhra Pradesh, Assam, Goa, Karnataka and Kerala. The betel vine cultivation being labour intensive provides employment throughout the year for youth and women through harvesting, grading, packing and marketing operations. In the betel leaf markets we can observe how women are basketting the leaves in spirals and arranging according to the grades in the marketable form. There is also a huge potential for export of betel leaves to the neighbouring countries.

3. Tuber spices

Turmeric harvesting, unearthing, boiling, cooking, preparation of bamboo mats for drying, cow dung smearing on floor for proper storage are the various activities done by women. Around Erode and Coimbatore areas of Tamil Nadu it is the housewives and farm women who carry out all these with utmost care. In Ginger also cleaning, peeling with wooden scrapers, raw and dry ginger processing have remained as ideal works for women. Ginger preserve or muraba, candy, soft drinks like ginger cocktail (which aids in digestion) ginger pickles, salted ginger or vinegar mixed with lime or green chilli are important value added products prepared from fresh ginger. All these preparations, ginger oil, oleoresin extractions are also managed by women with good remuneration.

4. Vegetable spices

The demand for chilli as spice and its oleoresins as a natural coloring agent is going up in the domestic as well as international markets. Andhra Pradesh is the leading state in the production of chilli with an overall share of 49.1% and the rural women are very much involved in the chilli cultivation, processing and marketing activities. Capsicum is gaining importance in the foreign trades and private companies are engaging more of women workers and researchers for production of hybrid capsicums and have opined that women are very sincere, time conscious, enthusiastic in learning new technologies and adapt to the working environment so quickly.

5. Seed spices

Seed spices also have a definite impact on the spices industry. Rural women in all spice growing states of India are participating in production and processing works of cumin, coriander, fennel, fenugreek, methi etc. In northern states seed spices are being grown and consumed in large volumes and so it is the livelihood of most of the farm women engaged in drying, cleaning, winnowing, sorting and grading.

6. Herbal spices

Medicinal and aromatic plants are in great demand now as there is a recent shift noticed towards organic cultivation, naturopathy treatments and herbal beauty products. It is easy for women to have a herbal garden in their home grounds, to carry out small-scale production. Urban women can cultivate herbs in pots as terrace or roof gardens for their own medicinal use and for supply. Women have enough traditional knowledge on curative properties of plants on child ailments, remedies related to puberty, delivery and gynaecological problems. Women involved in family care as mothers and housewives have an incise into the

nutritional aspects, utilization of kitchen wastes as organics, preservation of food & food products. Women are multifaceted and have proved themselves as home and farm managers and so growing herbal spices will be of great interest to them. We Indians are still relying on granny's recipes and value the ayurvedic, siddha and unani systems of medicine, which are intermingled with our culture and traditions. Kudumbashree units, Mahila mantrams and self-help groups nowadays are taking up some revolutionary endeavours in empowering farm women as entrepreneurs. Training on cultivation and processing aspects if given, they can start their own herbal gardens, extraction units and natural products.

Challenges

- Limited accessibility of women to various resources for direct farming.
- Gender issues related to partnership of land, credit, decision-making, programming, marketing and benefit sharing.
- Limited technological know how among women about quality standards and advanced processing techniques.
- Non-availability of gender neutral and women friendly farm equipments.
- Wage disparities between men and women for equal amount of work.
- Unequal distribution of responsibilities and conflicts between men and women.
- Enormous workload for women in professional and personal lives because of fragmentation of joint family system.
- Social taboos.
- Illiteracy among rural or farm women.
- Less awareness about the laws in favour of women.
- Lack of well planned detailed study on women's participation and contribution in the farming sector.

- Marital obligations, non co-operation of spouse and in laws.
- Depressed domestic prices due to WTO regimes.

Opportunities

- The area, production and productivity of spices showed steady increase, which pave the way for more research and development activities specific to women.
- Large bio diversity that exists in spices will lead to new exploration and utilization. Availability of high yielding varieties suitable for different agro climatic conditions ensures the quality of the end products and women can enter into this sector availing these opportunities.
- Vermicomposting and mushroom cultivation give an additional wealth from the farm wastes, which are easy for women to handle.
- Scientific cultivation, cropping systems and new crops provides additional returns to the farmers as well as farm women.
- Value addition, product diversification and by- product utilization have been given top priority in the recent years by developmental agencies under Ministry of Agriculture and Commerce, which will be a gain to spices industry.
- North Eastern regions and Andaman & Nicobar Islands are identified as potential areas for spices cultivation and under horticulture mission developmental activities are being aimed at women.
- Adoption of new technologies through women self help groups increases the profit and confidence in farm women.
- Research network between Government organizations, Directorates, Universities and Krishi Vigyan Kendras provides more scope for any improvement especially in the status of women through trainings and seminars.
- Internal market is very strong for spices and medicinal plants which can be a boon to the women groups to explore it. More than 90% of the spices produced in the country are used for domestic consumption and the rest exported as raw as well as value added products.
- Increasing population in India always gives a solid demand for any food products. The per capita consumption of spices in India has been estimated as 2.639 kg during 1999-2000 compared to per capita consumption of 1.448 kg in USA.
- Income and consumption power has been increased considerably with regard to processed and packeted foods. So product diversification will be a better option for women.
- Spices and spice products are the most important natural flavouring materials having wide applications in food and non-food items. As the organically grown spices are fetching more prices in the international markets it may be encouraging news for the women cooperative units.
- Most of the herbs and spices are composed of different types of ingredients and non-volatile components extracted as oleoresin or resinoids utilized in pharmaceuticals. Educated urban women can grow and supply herbal spices to these companies.
- Quality planting material availability is the need of the hour. Women can take up rapid multiplication methods of pepper, vanilla cuttings, nutmeg grafting, seed tubers and other planting materials preparation. Women run most of the nurseries in Kerala.

- In the Horticulture curriculum girl students are being given with equal opportunities in plantation management and crop production courses, which creates much of professionalism in women.
- Agricultural modernization has created a pattern shifting of more and more farmwomen towards horticultural enterprises.
- Spice and medicinal crops improve the environment and aesthetics leading to enhanced health and wealth, happiness and pleasure at work especially for women.
- Girls are now getting equal shares from their parents and so the chance of legalizing ownership of land holdings is more and it is good for women who are willing and interested to take up farming and any farm entrepreneurship. Dowry system should be diverted for the benefit of women.
- Agricultural institutions like ICAR and state universities have recruited more women scientists to work in commodity crops. Women farmers and entrepreneurs very well approach the women scientists without any hesitation for their guidance, training and any provision for schemes and developmental activities.

Conclusion

Horticulture sector harbours an ample scope with coverage of 15 million ha, production of about 147 million tonnes of produces and with a target to reach 360 million tonnes, which includes the export oriented spices industry. In the WTO regimes, spices under hi tech horticulture mode if receives favourable policy environment, increased investment and e-commerce, skillful employment could be expected from it for women. The main cause for the growth of consumption of spices is because of the increase in eating ethnic or oriental foods both in the developed and developing countries and a general trend to have a greater variety of foods. The demand and usage of spices and herbs by consumers has increased because they are appreciated as completely natural and healthy over the artificial additives. With this positive environment the opportunities should be promptly knocked down for the benefit of women in this industry. The knowledge that already exists with women should be gathered, acknowledged and identified for scientific basis and documented. Effective and immediate considerations should be given to the challenges affecting the performance of women. If it is done the spices industry will flourish along with women who are involved in it and ultimately their standard and quality of life are improved.

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