



Women empowerment through agro-processing sector

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Agro-processing is an economic activity that initiates from the farm and concludes at the fork of a consumer. It mainly deals with the post harvest protection, value addition and by product utilization of any agricultural commodity. It has helped in enhancing the rural economy by providing employment to women, who generally contribute to disguised employment. The exponential growth of agro processing sectors over last decade has not only helped in development and commercialization of rural products and waste utilization but also in minimizing post harvest loss of the farm products. This article puts light on the role of women in agro processing sector and how their role can be emphasized in order for the full fledged growth of this sector in rural areas.

Agro-processing centre can be defined as an enterprise where the agricultural commodities are processed post harvest in order to increase their storability and marketability. It mainly deals with the post-harvest protection, value addition and by-product utilization of any agricultural commodity. This industry has flourished a lot over the last five decades. India, being a patriarchal country, the outside work is generally performed by men of the house and the household works are performed by women. Thus, agro-processing has become very famous among women as it can be done inside the house with fewer inputs. Many processing operations like storage, material handling, sorting- grading, processing and value addition etc. are less energy intensive and sometimes require more patience and attention.

Reports show 100 per cent participation of women in the operations like cleaning, cutting, picking, storage and processing of the agro products. In addition, 75 per cent of the labour was shared by women in winnowing, weeding, gap filling, grading, shifting produce to threshing floor and cleaning of field farm (Singh *et al.*, 2004).

When women get involved in food and agro-processing units, not only the income of the house hold increases but also they help in converting the glutted agricultural commodities to processed and value-added products. The

evidence is there of social and economical improvement in rural areas after the establishment of self-help groups (SHGs) and small scale industries.

According to Okoro and Amaechi (2008) when women get involved in any production task, they work for more time with more attention than the men. Mbah (2008) supports this by restating the vital role of women in post-



harvest activities which was confirmed by FAO (1990). It is to be noted that women overwhelmingly provide the greatest proportion of household time spent on food processing and preparation. If these aspects of food preparation are included, women's labour share could well exceed 60 per cent.

At present government as well as some non-government organizations are paying special attention towards these industries as

they have a huge potential for employment. The Ministry of Mini, Small and Micro Enterprises, ICAR Agro Processing Centers (APCs) and NGOs are trying to promote the agro-processing unit among youth and women.

Under the aegis of ICAR, the All India Coordinated Research Project on Post Harvest Engineering and Technology has been working on the establishment, monitoring and promotion of agro processing centers (APC). APC set up by its operating centers have been

quite effective in post-harvest loss reduction, value addition, employment generation and income augmentation in rural catchments. APCs managed by only women workers have been successfully established by Bangalore, Bhubaneswar and Coimbatore centers of AICRP on PHET.

The attack on local processing sectors: Like the two sides of the coin, globalization too has some cons. The infiltration of MNCs into the local market has forced our small scale cottage industries to shut down. Global agribusiness is now attempting to take over food processing by making fresh, locally produced food appear backward, and stale food clothed in aluminum and plastic appear modern.

People generally don't consider the work done by women at the household level as a contribution to the national economy. It is often mistakenly said that only 2 per cent of the food is processed in India. However, when we look closely, we can see most of the foods are processed to a different level at the domestic level. If this processing level is to be increased and commercialized, India would have the largest food processing industry in the world. From the same wheat flour; *Roti*, thepla, *Naan*, bread, pizza etc. can be made with little modification in processing but they possess different texture and taste.

Earlier, women used to prepare *Gur*, *Achaar*, van papad, soaps, herbal concoctor for common ailments *Rassi* (rope) and baskets from kaans grass and baans (bamboo). But now as the market is flooded with plastic rope and plastic baskets, women have stopped making rope and baskets from the traditional grasses and bamboo, as they do not find a market for them. They do not find a market for soap and herbal concoctor ether and paper either, so they have stopped these activities also. On the whole, women have lost their incomes and livelihoods in the agro-processing sector. But they want the revival of the agro-processing sector in the region, as well as the market for their produce.

Women have always played an important role in the production and processing of food. Cottage and small industries income are being taken over by multinational companies (MNCs) and big business companies encouraged by the government. Apart from destroying women's livelihoods, this also leads to the flooding of the market with expensive, unhealthy junk food. Food resources are being diverted on a large scale to this elite consumer market, creating scarcity for households and rising price rises. It may be demanded that food processing should be reserved for the small-scale sector. Such a reservation of the food processing industry for the small

scale sector would be consistent with WTO requirements of national treatment since it would be treating domestic industries in the same ways as MNCs by excluding both from entry into the food processing industry. The industrialized corporatized agriculture promoted by the agreement on agriculture is robbing women of livelihoods in food production and food processing.

Need for agro-processing in the rural economy: With a growing population, the issue of unemployment is also increasing. Also, increasing the disguised unemployment in the farm filed with an increase in farm mechanization. To curb this problem, many plans have been made like MGNREGA by the government.

Another crisis India is facing after the green revolution is the post-harvest processing and value addition of the farm products. Once we solve the later with the help of the former. Govt.'s initiative to engage rural youth and women in post-harvest processing and value addition can not only help in increasing the crop life and its usability but also give employment to the people. This, ultimately help in increasing the family income and strengthen the rural economy.

Women involvement in the agro-food industry: Women play a very important role in advancing post-agricultural value chain development. They participate in many aspects of paid (*viz.*, trade and marketing) and unpaid activities (*viz.*, tending to crops and animals, collecting water and wood for fuel, and caring for family members etc.) in rural life.

In Sub-Saharan Africa, the women account for up to 80 per cent of the food produced, processed, stored and marketed (FAO, 2007). Yet despite their important role in agricultural production and marketing, women's engagement is hampered by some bottlenecks in the agricultural value chain.

Women education in agro-processing: With time, many new technologies are invented by taking into account the ergonomic aspects of women. The people from urban areas get the knowledge of this upto some extent due to their awareness. But a number of women working in agro are less in as compared to that of the rural mass, where these technologies fail to reach. Women with a higher level of education are less likely to be involved in small scale agro-processing than that of lower level ones. Thus, by training less educated women we can achieve the great feat in agro-processing. A well educated woman can have wide visibility for the processing technology and future market of local produce. Education and income significantly influenced rural women's involvement in agro-

processing enterprise of the national special programmed for food security. Women with a higher level of education should be encouraged to go into agro-processing; if possible some incentives should be attached to agro-processing to encourage more women with lower income level. All these will ensure food security to combat the poverty bedeviling the rural populace (Adesope *et al.*, 2010).

Women's involvement in the value chain of agricultural product: Women generally face discrimination and inequality at the rural workplace, some of the new organizations and NGOs have created a better paying and healthy work environment for women in value addition and food processing sector. The large-scale incorporation of women in the packing stage of non-traditional agro-export production may be one of the most important developments for female employment over the last few decades (Deere, 2005).

Power relations among producers, processors, wholesalers and buyers along a value chain determine revenue distribution among the aforesaid parties. These power relations must be understood in order for poor small-scale women producers to improve their position in value chains. Most women producers join an organization to improve their position in a specific node of the chain, such as having access to inputs, processing or marketing their produce.

SEWA, after conducting grass root level research, developed a specific commodity value chains by linking the women producers-processors and traders by eliminating the intermediaries. Thus, the control over different nodes of the chain has come to women processors and formed equitable income distribution.

Since Independence, there have been many movements in which lower middle class women have played an active role in their empowerment. For instance, the growth of Sri Mahila Griha Udyog started production of *Lijjat papad*. Only seven women started this in March 1959, in Girgram, South Mumbai. However, with continuously increasing demand of their product and thus the income, they soon started to diversify into other areas of production including the flour mills in 1975 (to grind lentils etc.), masalas (spices) division in 1976, printing division in 1977 and polypropylene packing division in 1978. The cottage leather division 1979, the match industry division in 1979 and *Agarbatti* (incense sticks).

Support services for women in the food processing sector:

Emphasizing on resource base for women's : Female agro-processors would benefit if they are made aware of

the proper production of cash crops, sustainable farming, and governments' initiatives towards post-harvest processing of agricultural commodities etc. Since in rural areas agricultural extension services provided is limited, there is need of agro support services that gives attention towards these women. This urges the need of research on female in urban agriculture in order to explore its full potential in terms of market and trade.

Many a times, the self employed women operating food processing enterprises need capital investment so as to expand their business, increase the productivity and income. This capital may be used in procuring high capacity equipments and adapting new advanced technologies. In some cases, this capital are used for fulfilling short term but basic needs of the family covering health and education expanses.

Technology impact on women: In one hand it gives women chance to get involved in business, improve the productivity reliving household burdens but in other hand due to automation, it takes away jobs of manual labourers creating unemployment especially for women as they generally as manual labourer requiring less skill and more time.

In informal production sectors, techniques and methods used for production are traditional which are time consuming and physically demanding. Introduction of new technology in processing line can helpful to overcome these troubles by reducing time of processing and increasing production. However, technology should be inexpensive, simple, small and can be manufactured domestically.

Precedent examples concluded, introduction to the new technology result in decrease in importance of employed women e. g. modern rice milling equipment, grinding equipment etc. reduces employment of women. This impact can be overcome not only by introducing advanced technologies but by training the workers properly.

Conclusion: For increasing women's empowerment and attraction towards agro processing sector, services like providing training and credits only is not sufficient. This can be solved by developing the overall intellect of rural women in understanding the provision of credit acquisition and spending it with proper planning, trainings, development of women's business skills and market studies etc. (to identify domestic demand and export potential for processed product, identify possible threat from imports). These services must be supported with policy advocacy work. To make this policy strong, support of women's organisations and co-operatives helpful at ground level and at national level trade associations and

women's unions will play important role.

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