

Women's Involvement in Food Processing Sector: Current Status and Perspectives in Assam

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Abstract

Involvement of Assamese women in preparation of processed food is vital and incomparable. Many women can earn their livelihood with the help of this activity and even empowered in socially and financially. Food processing, the conversion of raw agricultural ingredients in to food and food in to other value added products is suitable for us due to availability of raw materials, labours, less capital requirements and heavy demand of processed food at present days. Moreover it reduces the post harvest losses and reduces the scarcity of demand during off Seasonal period. Here we study the contribution of women in fruits and vegetables sector in Assam by collecting data from 75 processing units from different districts and analyses the data with the help of simple statistical tools like percentage, averages etc. The study reveals that the women are involved both as entrepreneur and workers in food processing sector. Almost 40 percent of the employees are female and 24 percent of the entrepreneurs are female and take the responsibility in an organized way.

Keywords: Food processing, Livelihood, Post harvest losses, Involvement, Capital requirements.

Introduction

Women play an important role in production of food as well as processing activities. While there is still insufficient gender impartial data to give exact figures on women's contributions to food production and processing activities almost everywhere in the world. At present most of the women are empowered with these activities. Empowerment basically refers the creation of an environment that provides them to make independent decisions on their personal as well as social development and it shine as equals in society. At present time the term women empowerment has been recognised as the central issue in determining the status of women in the society. In a society the position of women is an excellent index of its educational, cultural and spiritual level.

Food processing is the conversion of raw agricultural ingredients (plants and animal products) into food and food into other value added product. It is a large sector that connects with the activities such as agriculture, horticulture, plantation, animal husbandry and fisheries. It converts fresh harvested crops and animal product into attractive, marketable and value added long life products. In India food processing is considered as sunrise sector due to its large prospects in economic development of the country. It also includes other industries that use agricultural inputs for manufacturing of edible products. This sector is considered as one of the major sources of employment in labour abundant country like India.

Processing activities begins from time immemorial. In those days preservation was done by sun drying, with salt and other primitive forms of food processing or various ways such as roasting, smoking, steaming, and baking. At present the sector employs around 18% of the country's industrial work force and ranked fifth in terms of production, consumption, export and expected growth (Merchant, 2008). A strong and dynamic processing sector is capable of playing a vital role not only in income and employment generation of a country but also encouraging in reducing post harvest losses, diversification and commercialization of agricultural activities, enhancing self life, ensuring value addition, enlarged market for

exported agricultural food products, foreign exchange earnings and providing forward and backward linkages.

India is fairly rich in raw materials but the existing processing level and value addition are very low as compared to the other countries. The highest share of the processed food is in the dairy sector, where 37 percent of total produce is processed. The processing level is around 21% in case of meat and 6% in poultry products. In case of fruits and vegetables only 2.2 percent are processed compared to USA (65%), Philippines (78%) and China (23%). Out of 2.2 percent only 48% are in organized sector and the remaining is in unorganized sector (Merchant, 2008). The seasonality of agricultural production and heavy post harvest losses due to inadequate storage and transportation facilities reduces the volume of processed food. (EPW 2002). Different sub sectors for food processing industry and the different products are listed in table 1

Table 1
The sub sectors and different food products

sectors	products
Diary	Whole milk powder, skimmed milk powder, condensed milk, ice cream, butter and ghee, cheese
Fruits &Vegetables	Beverages, juices, concentrates, pulps, slices, frozen & dehydrated products, potato wafers/chips, banana chips, fruit jams, chatny ,etc
Grain and cereals	Flour, bakeries, starch glucose, cornflakes, malted foods, vermicelli, beer and malt extracts, grain based alcohol
Fisheries	Frozen canned products mainly in fresh form
Meat and poultry	Frozen and packed –mainly in fresh from egg powder
Consumer foods	Snack food, nankeens, biscuits, ready to eat food, alcoholic and non alcoholic beverages
Commercial crop	including spices like chilies, turmeric etc.
Plantation crop	coconut, cashew nut etc.

Source: MOFPI, Annual report, 2017

Assam produces a variety of primary food crops, fruits and vegetables, but the food processing sector in the state is still at a rudimentary stage of development. Although a number of food processing units have come up in recent years, food processed in the state still accounts for less than 30 percent of the state's total agricultural products. Besides, the growth of the sector has been lopsided. The sector is dominated by units of processing primary food products like packaged milk, milled flour, rice, tea and spices, fruits and vegetables etc. Processing and packaging of perishable fruits and vegetables still occupies an insignificant place. As a result the earnings of the farmers engaged in the production of perishable crops are adversely affected and they compelled to go for distress sale of bulk of their produce for inadequacy of facilities like proper

storage, transportation etc. A woman has an important role in successful running of processing sector of a country due to their patience and work experiences (G.Sarmah 2019). An attempt has been made in the present study to analyse the contribution of women in food processing industry in Assam by considering mainly fruits and vegetables as sample subsector with the following objectives

Objectives and Methodology

The main objectives of the study are to analyse the women contribution to the economy of Assam through food processing industry. Therefore we try to analyse the women participation as permanent or part time worker in food processing industry and secondly the percentage of women entrepreneur in this sector.

The study is based on both primary and secondary data. The secondary data has been collected from various official and non official, published as well as unpublished sources. Primary data, which constitute the core of the study, has been collected through field study of units engaged in processing of fruits and vegetables. A standard and pretested interview schedule is prepared and the entrepreneur is interviewed to collect the relevant data and facts. Simple mathematical tools like percentage, average etc are used to analyse the objectives.

Analysis of the Study

There are 8451 food processing units in Assam, since inception to May 2017 (Directorate of Industries, GOA). The subsector wise distribution reveals the predominance of rice processing units accounting to more than 41 percent of the total, followed by atta (15.38%), bakery (11.84%), oil processing (8.91%), spice (5.14%) and so on. In Assam there are 356 Registered fruits and vegetables processing units up to 2017. Out of that only 21 percent (75 units) are selected as sample to study the distribution of women participation. Among these units there are 289 employees worked as permanent employee and 71 as part time or temporary workers. The education level of the workers is different for various activities. The distribution of human resources on the basis of educational level is given in the following table.

Table 2
Distribution of human resource by education level

SI.No.	Education level	Percentage of employees
1	Illiterate	21 %
2	Primary	27%
3	Up to HSLC	35%
4	Diploma holders	4%
5	Graduate	6 %
6	Post Graduate	1%
7	Food technologist	6%

Source; Field study in Assam

The study reveals that among the total 360 numbers of employees in food processing industry 21 percent (75) is illiterate. 27 percent of them i.e. 97 employees are primary educated, 126 are HSLC passed and the remaining are diploma holders, graduates, post graduates and food technologists. On

the other hand if we observe minutely regarding the gender of the employees it is seen that the sector is dominated by men but the percentage of women are not negligible. Almost 41 percent of these employees are women, i.e.147 women workers are working against 213 mail workers in these sample units. Women workers in food processing industries have to undertake double responsibilities as wage earners and as housewives, looking after their husbands and children in families. All food processing industries are considered as female oriented tasks as they involved operations which are similar to household tasks. Women workers involved in food processing industries performed the monotonous repetitive jobs of washing, peeling, cutting, grinding of fruits and vegetables, mixing spices like chillies etc.

The numbers of male and female as well as part time and full time workers in this sample study are reflected in the following table. (Table 3)

Table 3
Employment in food processing sector

Subsector	Male	Female	Total
Fruits and vegetables	213 (59.16)	147 (40.84)	360

Source: Field study

The data presented in the table 1 reveals that the employment in the subsector is dominated by male employees. Employment generated in Fruits &Vegetables subsector consists of 59.16 percent male and 40.84 percent are female workers. The numbers of male, female and total employees are represented in figure 1.

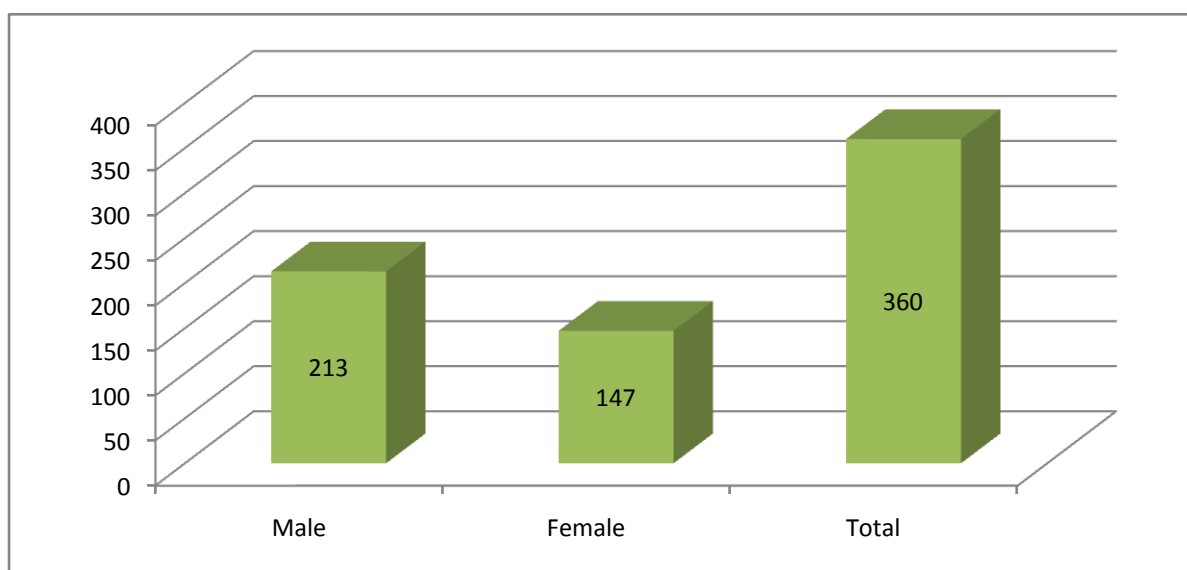


Figure 1 (Numbers of male and female employees in fruits and vegetables subsectors)

Out of these 147 women workers 31 are temporary workers and the remaining are permanent. Most of the temporary workers are cleaners and temporary suppliers. Most of them are working in these industries for a long time.

Regarding entrepreneur it is seen that, in Assam several women entrepreneur are come forward to establish industries by utilizing traditional fruits and vegetables. For example In Jorhat district a lady entrepreneur first start to produce banana chips along with red chili powder trained under Assam Agricultural University, Jorhat and at present she is an established entrepreneur.

Food processing industry has some opportunity that the women can get to start or to develop.

1. The industrial unit can be started at home scale in a un organized manner.
2. Raw material required for the industry is locally available in Assam.
3. No more skilled labour is essential to produce processed product.
4. The industry can run with less amount of working capital.
5. Different product can be produced with seasonal raw material.

1. When it is started at home the women can look after his family member at the same time and the other member can help her in producing the product.
2. During the time of different festivals the entrepreneur can prepare different products for her own family as well as for business purposes.
3. The product can be sold from the same place and they can run other activities parallely like weaving, knitting etc
4. With the help of byproducts from food processing different products can be produced.

Regarding raw materials it can be said that "Bhim Kol" (Banana) is very rich in starch and is used by poor people as a weaning food. Taking a cue from this one entrepreneur, from Majuli of Jorhat district developed a baby food (Bhimvita) using the banana and powdered rice and green grams. The Bhimvita baby food is probably the most innovative product developed by the local entrepreneur. The central Food Technology Research Institution at Mysore has declared the baby food for consumption. A Dubai-based businessman has expressed an interest in importing it.

Regarding the second objectives in our study it reveals that among the 75 entrepreneurs of sample

units 18 are women entrepreneur, i.e. 24 percent of the total are women. Following table (table 4) clearly shows the result.

Table -4
Numbers of women entrepreneurs in fruits and vegetables industry

Fruits and vegetables processing units	Male	Female	Total
Entrepreneurs	57 (68%)	18 (24%)	75

The women whether workers or entrepreneurs have face some problems in the working field. In this sample study 12 women entrepreneurs accounting for 66.67 percent of the total complain that they are unable to get the sale proceeds from the retail shopkeepers at proper time and proper amount. They refuse to pay the required amount even after the sale of the product. As results dally collection cost of the entrepreneur is increasing continuously. The study also reveals that some factors are responsible for building of the performance level of the entrepreneur. Particularly schooling, training and experience of the entrepreneur has significant association with their performances while the gender, family size of the entrepreneur and location of the units has no significant association with performance level of entrepreneur.

Conclusion

From the discussion it can be concluded that there are various types of employment in food processing industry in Assam. The women are working as a worker as well as entrepreneur though

they have faced several problems in their workplaces. Prospect of fruit and vegetable processing industry in Assam is bright. With large amount of local raw materials, infrastructural facilities, establishment of training institutions etc helps the entrepreneur to establish the food processing industry in the state.

Though the numbers of women workers are less in numbers in comparison to male yet the prospect of the sector is large enough for the economic development of the state.

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