

Homestead farming- An avenue for women entrepreneurship in south 24 Paragans district of West Bengal, India

Written by: J K Sundaray¹, A Bhattacharya², A D Deo² & A G Ponniah³

Background

“You can tell the condition of a nation by looking at the status of its women”
- Jawaharlal Nehru.

Due to malnutrition and severe poverty 22% of Indian population remains undernourished while 29.8% of rural population were below poverty line. Though women play a pivotal role in building the backbone of a nation's economy but the literacy gap in India which is 65.46% for females while for males it is 82.14% (Census, 2011) prevents the empowerment of women. In rural communities livelihood is centred on agriculture and allied activities and in West Bengal almost all household possess a small piece of land in the backyard of their house therefore, there are immense possibilities for the establishment of homestead farming system by utilising the backyard land of the dwelling house to the year round provision of food, fodder and other household necessities. It is an integrated, farming system including horticulture, aquaculture and animal husbandry and its products including fruits, vegetables, fish, chicken and other valuable materials such as bamboo and wood are very essential from economic and ecological standpoints. A study in Bangladesh reported that the majority of earning women earned money from vegetable cultivation (38%), poultry rearing (24%), fruit cultivation (19%), small business (10%), and cattle rearing (10%). Therefore, women's potentiality can be easily utilized by adopting homestead farming system towards their empowerment and livelihood development.

How the new development works?

Because of minimal inputs, homestead aquaculture practice can substantially reduce production costs. In the similar way floriculture or bee-keeping may become a successful enterprise as they have high demand in India because of several rituals. A study in South 24 Pargana district of West Bengal reported that homestead aquaculture return 3.8 times and horticulture returns 5 times of production cost which indicates the potentiality of the business. The savings realized by homestead farm for direct consumption reduce the household's expenditure and provide a scope to purchase nutritious food. The fish and prawns possess high calorie and protein whereas vegetables and other animal products are highly enriched with protein, vitamins and minerals which enhance the nutritional status of the household members.

¹Central Institute of Freshwater Aquaculture, Bhubaneswar, Odisha, India

²Kakdwip Research Centre of CIBA, Kakdwip, South 24 Paraganas, West Bengal-743347, India

³Central Institute of Brackishwater Aquaculture, 75 Santhome High Road, R A Puram, Chennai-600028, India



Livestock can be sold for cash in times of need and women are usually able to retain control over this income. Betel vine cultivation where women are actively participating is means of a quite higher income of Rs. 75000/ year. Therefore, the promotion of homestead farming can aim the development of women entrepreneurship because of its operational easiness, economic generation, nutrition security and in situ conservation of a wide range of bio-resources by cultivation of native species.

Opportunities and hurdles

The women enterprise in West Bengal is 6.5% of overall Indian small scale industry. As they are entering into a new era for their upward mobility it is estimated that presently women entrepreneurs comprise about 10% of the total entrepreneurs in India and if the prevailing trends continue, it is likely to be 20 % of the entrepreneurial force. The proximity of the farming system to the house ensure that the women are able to transfer the extra time available from managing the house and children into an income generating activity and the ability to integrate the organic output from house and different farming activities into an integrated farming system. But low income, social commitments, lack of self-confidence and optimistic attitude prevent them to develop the entrepreneurship.

Success story of successful woman homestead farmer

Mrs. Thezanoi from Sethikema village of Nagaland started a small poultry unit comprises of 400 Vanaraja birds. She used locally available bamboo and thatch grass for constructing shed and paddy husk as litter material. She sold birds at 150/kg in local market and neighbouring villages and thereby earned a net benefit of Rupees 39,470. The scientific support from ICAR empowered her by which she motivates the other women for initiating backyard poultry farming to make them self-sustainable. This story proves that a handful of focused women are now stepping up to show their capability by utilising and integrating of local resources and acting as an entrepreneur.

Future Challenges

Though the homestead farming has lots of potential but inadequate supply of quality input especially in aquaculture, severe poverty and the lack of scientific and technical knowledge will be the big challenges for women to develop this system.

Responses from significant bodies

To ensure the utilisation of women's full potential some governmental policies, guidelines and strategies including capacity building programmes for the involvement of women in homestead farming should be formulated and implemented. Towards this way Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) is working on the women workers to obtain full employment and self-reliance. Whereas some financial institutions like Small Industries Development Bank of India, National Bank Agricultural Rural Development, cooperative banks play a pivotal role in giving financial assistance and consultancy services to women entrepreneurs.

Lesson to learn

Emancipation of women by adopting homestead farming system which requires low capital investment, modest educational requirements, dependence on local raw materials and limited technical and managerial skills, can raise the level of women empowerment as well as the household economy.

Photo credit: ©FAO/Munir Uz Zaman

