

Impact of Foxhunt Production on Women in Fishing Community

Teferi Chalchisa*

Department of Rural Development and Agricultural Extension, Jimma University, Jimma, Ethiopia

Commentary

Foxhunt or Makhana, is a Unique Selling Product (USP) of Bihar that covers over 13000 acres of land mainly in Madhubani, Darbhanga, Sitamarhi, Saharsa, Katihar, Purnia, Supaul, Kisangani and Araria districts. Its seed is also known as the black diamond. Gorgon nut is another name for it. Makhana, also known as fox nut, is a type of hydrophyte that is utilised as both a drug and a food, and it has a wide range of applications and future prospects in the realms of medicine, food, and economics. Popped Makhana is one of the most popular dry fruits among people due to its low fat content and high carbohydrate, protein, and mineral content. It is a nutritious and healthful diet with a protein level of 10%-12%. Cultivation of makhana is a highly tedious, cumbersome, Labour intensive process and involves human drudgery. Makhana is one of the important aquatic plants in the northern part of Bihar, and it is grown annually by the traditionally skilled mallah community in Bihar. Women in rural areas across the globe engage in diverse economic approaches to sustain a livelihood for their families. Foxhunt is one of the premium dry fruit, and its seed is edible, which look like popcorn.

Most of the artificial and natural born reservoir of this region is suitable reservoirs for the cultivation of Foxhunt; it is an important source of employment for fishers. Foxhunt has a heavy water requirement being a popular freshwater crop, ponds having at least 2 to 5 feet. It is mostly grown in stagnant stretches like wetlands, waterholes, ox-bow Lake, land dispersion swamps, marshlands, and ditches. However, being an important aquatic plant, it is still neglected. The cultivators grow this crop to gain income for poverty alleviation, livelihood security to the economically backward rural areas, and earning foreign exchange. The cultivation of foxhunt is now being shifted from the pond system to field conditions; at present, 40%-50% of the foxhunt crop is cultivated in low land rice field conditions, and the rest are traditionally grown in the pond systems.

In the traditional method, it is more labor intensive, and the health of farmers is also at risk; on the other hand, cultivating it in the paddy field would increase crop intensity and fewer health hazards for farmers. People involved in the cultivation of

foxhunt are mostly uneducated and migrate to other places after cultivating foxhunt. However, nowadays, women started participating in production techniques, *viz.* spraying fertilizers, insecticides, and pesticides and weeding operations in foxhunt cultivation. Women perform numerous labor-intensive activities such as weeding, collections, cleaning, drying, gradation, roasting, frying, popping, rubbing, storage, transportation. They work with their family members at home on a continual basis, from first frying to second frying of foxnut seeds to pop and thrash to grading.

Women and their families were mostly involved in frying nuts, thrashing, rubbing, grading, packing, and storing. Women of the fishing community enjoy their economic contribution at the household level as they are fetched with additional earnings. In contrast, women were involved in works like drying foxhunt seeds within the household. They were not involved in cultivation as ponds located on the outskirts of the village or some ponds taken on lease are in other villages. The popping of foxhunt is more capital, and more labor-intensive is required. It is dried up in the sun, and then it is fried on 'Bhatti or Chulha' (fireplace) where women have to sit for hours to fry it and then from 'Pitna' (wooden hammer), the seed is crushed, and then foxnut pop is processed. Most women have participated during the first frying of nuts, rubbing, and storage. Men are generally engaged in cultivating the foxhunt crop, transplanting, including sowing, processing foxhunt, and harvesting guris, while women are mostly involved in processing foxhunt and harvesting guris. They were engaged in foxhunt seeds (guris) and pop production and trading and as wages laborers. Women play a significant role in foxhunt processing and allied field activities, including the main fisheries, crop production, and post-harvest operations. Women's participation in foxhunt production varies significantly from region to region. However, regardless of these activities, there is hardly any activity in foxhunt production, except planting and seed collection in which fewer women are actively involved.

Women contribute far more to production and processing. Women are occupied for generations and have acquired unique

Correspondence to: Teferi Chalchisa, Department of Rural Development and Agricultural Extension, Jimma University, Jimma, Ethiopia; E-mail: chalchisatef88@yahoo.com

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skills in processing which determines the quality of Makhana pop. Women spread nuts on the mats to dry after processing seeds. They engage in sieving all the processed seeds for gradation. They execute continuous work of first frying to second frying of Makhana seeds to pop and thrash to grading. They also help in removing the kernels from Makhana pop. Thus, the contribution of women needs to be acknowledged.