

# Coconut plucking – Empowering stride for women in Kerala

OUR BUREAU, MUMBAI

As the world is celebrating the 101st Women's Day, Indian women too are breaking the proverbial glass ceiling and upsetting many a male bastion. For instance, in Kerala, the womenfolk have taken giant strides in climbing up coconut trees and plucking coconuts, an area traditionally dominated by men.

And this is not just a small passing phase. In fact, many women in Kerala have taken it up as their profession, thanks to Indian Institute of Spices Research (IISR), Kozhikode, which recently initiated a six-day training programme on the subject at the Krishi Vigyan Kendra (KVK), Peruvanamuzhi.

The initiative, which was taken up as part of the Friends of Coconut Tree programme being implemented by the Coconut

Development Board (CDB), offered training programme in coconut tree-climbing for a group of 20 women (20-35 years).

The CDB is seeking to evolve newer technologies of value-added products or carry out research in any stream pertaining to coconuts.

"Ironically the state is suffering because of a shortage of coconut pluckers for the past few years," Deepti A, one of the trainers and a subject matter specialist, IISR, informed F&B News in a chat over telephone.

At the outset, the programme covered introduction to coconut palm, climate, soil, requirement sessions on climbing machine-main parts, working and trial, nutrient management, recycling of palm waste, intercropping and mixed cropping.

Further, practical lessons on climbing coconut trees, and ses-

sions on harvesting, tender and mature nut identification, identification of pests and disease of coconut and their management, crown cleaning aspects, seed nut procurement, safe handling of seed nuts and tender nuts, coconut nursery and its management were all part of the programme.

The board which looks and deals with various issues pertaining to coconut has many projects under the scheme and interestingly, one such project was to identify and select about 500 coconut palm-climbers from each of the 14 districts of Kerala, according to Deepti.

Fortunately it was a win-win situation for the ones at KVK where among the seven batches, the female counterpart stood as a knife-edge competition when these first batch of 20 women climbers were picked up and selected.

"It is hard to get coconut pluckers in the state and this was an initiative to create self-employment among women," she said, adding that women in this area have learnt to overcome the problem which is existing in the industry currently through attending this programme.

"The training gave us a sense of confidence and turned us into care-free individuals in this stream," said Reeja V G, one of the trainees who has taken up coconut climbing as a means of livelihood, interestingly, by using the newly-introduced coconut climbing machine.

For Veena Dinesh, another trainee, it was a good experience - learning the art of climbing the coconut palm. Initially it made her conscious while climbing, but today, within a few hours, she could climb about 11 to 20 trees a day using the machine for Rs 15-20 per palm.

"Normally, we charge Rs 15-20 per palm and this has become the best source of livelihood, hence I am contemplating to take it as a profession," she trailed off. Apart from Dinesh, many women are now taking it up as a profession and sharing the financial burdens of their families.

According to statistics provided by CDB, of the total production of coconuts about 5 per cent is consumed in the tender form for drinking purposes and the rest utilised as mature nuts for household and religious purposes, including in production of edible copra, milling copra and desiccated coconut.

It further stated that the coconut oil production in the country was nearly 4.5 lakh tonnes and out of this about 40 per cent was consumed for edible purposes, 46 per cent for toiletry uses and 14 per cent for industrial uses.