

Women in Produce: panel interview

Three leading women in India's fresh produce business tell *Asiafruit* how the industry is achieving greater gender equality.

by Chris Komorek
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NINA PATIL
 Fresh Express
 Director



SHUBHA RAWAL
 IG International
 Head of procurement



PURNIMA KHANDELWAL
 INI Farms
 Chief executive



How do you see the role and representation of women in India's fresh produce business, particularly at senior management levels?

Nina Patil: Around 90 per cent of the work force, especially at farm level, in India's fresh produce trade are women. Ironically the proportion of produce industry leaders, in my estimate, would be less than 10 per cent in our country.

Shubha Rawal: Women employees are a natural fit in the fresh produce industry. They can bring a vital perspective to the fresh produce business and their presence at senior management levels is bound to increase. Women at senior levels in India's fresh produce industry are largely from the business owner's family. In the corporates, women are mainly into operations or finance. In the organic produce industry, there are many young women entrepreneurs in India who are starting up and doing some very innovative work.

Purnima Khandelwal: Almost a decade ago, there were very few opportunities for women in leadership roles. By narrowing the gender gap in leadership positions, today's new-age businesses and entrepreneurial ecosystems are enabling women to dispel stereotypes. Consequently, I am observing a steady rise in the representation of women in senior management roles in the fresh produce and agri-tech industry.

What are the unique challenges or opportunities facing women in business in India?

NP: Defying social expectations and financial insecurity are two of the main challenges. Like many countries, India is a patriarchal society, so defying conventional norms, making our voice heard and count is a challenge, but things are definitely improving. The fact that ladies in our packhouses in rural India are becoming financially independent, operating independent bank accounts and managing homes while still working in the packhouse, is an achievement.

Unfortunately, women do not generally have property in their names to use as collateral for obtaining funds from external sources. Thus, their access to funding is limited. Given this situation, women entrepreneurs are bound to rely on their own savings, as well as any loans from friends or relatives. One of our prime objectives at Fresh Express has been to ensure our women are financially literate and independent. To achieve this, we transfer 100 per cent of their salaries into a bank account, which they manage.

SR: Attitudes towards women in the Indian workplace are largely progressive, but the journey for



women to get there may not be easy. The tremendous growth prospects for the fresh fruit industry in India can present a unique opportunity for women to take up leadership positions. With the creations of more jobs, more women can easily find employment.

Pro-women government policies can also be a big mover in this direction. Encouragement of girls to opt for higher education can help achieve equality, thereby socially allowing women to take up jobs that may be at present seen as purely men's domain.

PK: Traditional gender stereotypes that are deeply ingrained in patriarchal mindsets, as well as social prejudices towards women entrepreneurs, are at the core of challenges for women. The tide is turning and more female entrepreneurs are stepping forward, inspiring more women to do the same. I believe the onus is on leading women entrepreneurs to shatter stereotypes, set examples in our society, and build an ecosystem that inspires women to take their first step towards entrepreneurship.

What does your company do to promote and support women in leadership, and to drive change in the sector?

NP: Fresh Express believes in giving equal opportunities to men and women to rise to leadership positions, as per their capabilities, experience and willingness to take on responsibilities. Women make up 95 per cent of the workforce in our packhouses, and the ratio of men to women managers in our packhouses would be 3:1, in favour of women. This is not only because they are women, but because they have worked for it and earned it on their own merit. As a mentor,

OPPOSITE, BELOW— Domestic violence awareness events are organised by Global Rights for Women to help empower India's female work force
RIGHT— Women are represented strongly at packhouse and farm level



I believe my role is to lead by example and I am happy to support my packhouse fuelled by women power.

SR: IG International is aware of the dynamic role women can play in this industry. We empower them with continuous training and knowledge enhancement programmes. IG is one of the few companies in India in the fresh produce industry that has appointed a female sourcing manager. We have women employees across accounts and finance, marketing, imports, and other departments. Our e-commerce division is run entirely by women, as is our kiwifruit packaging unit. As a leader in the industry, I hope our actions are able to inspire many more players to support women's employment and women's leadership, and drive change in the fresh fruit sector.

PK: INI Farms is the first tech-enabled farm-to-fork horticulture company in India to be headed by a female chief executive, with two of the company's five board members female. Across our management and workforce, there is equal pay for equal work policy – encouraging more women workers to participate in joining the farming sector.

With over 80 per cent of fresh-cut workers and 60 per cent of pomegranate packing workers being women, INI Farms has successfully managed to transform traditionally male-dominated agricultural activities with the female workforce. Recently, INI Farms was also recognised as the first and only horticulture company in India to be certified by the Great Place to Work Institute.

Do you see attitudes towards the role of women in India's fresh fruit and vegetable industry changing?

NP: I definitely feel fewer men staring at me now. Male farmers, especially in rural areas, are more open to discussing business about their farms with me. Women in business in urban areas is common and well accepted. In rural areas, where we still have some way to go, it is up to women to come forth and take their place confidently. When Fresh Express started 27 years ago, we did not have a single female farmer. Today we are proud to say 13 per cent of our farmers are women and we see this number increasing every year.

SR: The role of women has changed significantly and for the better. Women are now self-sufficient and financially independent. With the encouragement of co-education, women are now marching side-by-side with men, in every walk of life.

PK: Women have played a crucial role in agricultural and allied fields since the very beginning. It has been inspiring to see women progress from being farm labour to positions of leadership in the agricultural ecosystem. Confidence and competence are the two essential attributes that can help women to succeed in a traditionally male-dominated industry like agriculture and the fresh fruit industry. [A](#)