

Gender Dimensions in the Backyard Poultry Sector in Sri Lanka

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Many households in Sri Lanka depend on backyard poultry production for both income and nutrition. The main objective of this study is to explore gender roles associated with backyard poultry farming in Sri Lanka along with documenting the key practices which influence health risks and their association with gender, region and ethnicity. The study employed secondary and primary data collected through ethnographic methods such as semi-structured interviews and field observations. Households raising backyard chicken in Northern (N), North Western (NW), and Eastern (E) provinces were selected using snowball sampling as those three consist of the highest number of registered backyard farms in Sri Lanka. Fifteen women and fifteen men from twenty-seven farms were interviewed for this study. Data was analysed using thematic analysis on the MAXQDA software. This qualitative study found that backyard farms exhibit a significant gender-based division of labour in North Western and Eastern Provinces. Men perform the heavy work, while women perform daily caregiving tasks and tasks that require less physical strength. However, in the Northern Province Tamil women not only performed strenuous tasks but were also more independent in decision-making and financial management. The study found laxity towards health and hygiene, with higher chances of spreading zoonotic diseases in all three provinces regardless of gender or ethnicity. There was considerable reliance on traditional treatment methods, informal purchasing of medicine over the counter, and consulting of fellow farmers in the case of birds' illnesses. The results represent that the gendered division of labour is prominent among Sinhala and Muslim communities within the backyard poultry farms whereas Tamil women are independent in many senses due to their pre-exposure to war and hardship. However, hygienic practices were poor regardless of gender or ethnicity in all three provinces. In conclusion, there is a visible gender division of labour within the backyard poultry system in Sri Lanka and the management practices pose higher health risks to the farmers irrespective of the ethnic group or region.

Keywords: Gender, Poultry, Labour, Hygiene, Empowerment

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