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Gender Dimensions in the Backyard Poultry Sector in Sri Lanka

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Abstract

Sri Lankan households 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 based on region, ethnicity, and the key practices which influence health risks. The study employed primary data collected through semi-structured interviews and field observations and secondary data from reports published in Sri Lanka. Backyard farms 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 female and fifteen male interviewees from twenty-six farms were interviewed while thematic analysis was done through 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 heavy work, while women perform daily caregiving tasks. In the Northern Province Tamil women perform strenuous tasks and demonstrate independence in decision-making and management. Considerable reliance on traditional treatment methods, and informal purchasing of medicine over the counter, in the case of birds' illnesses were prevalent. The results suggest that the gendered division of labour is prominent among Sinhala and Muslim communities whereas Tamil women are independent 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, with associated higher health risks.¹

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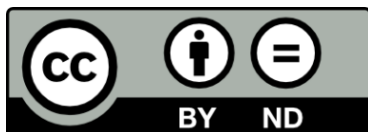
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Keywords: Empowerment, Gender, Hygiene, Labour, Poultry



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¹ An abstract based on this study has been presented at iPURSE 2024 organized by University of Peradeniya



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INTRODUCTION

Sri Lankan poultry production mainly functions as broiler, layer, breeder, and backyard (Department of Animal Production and Health, 2022). Broiler chickens are mainly raised for commercial production of meat, while layer poultry farming deals with commercial egg production. Breeder farms focus on producing fertile eggs bearing healthy chicks, and backyard poultry farming is a free ranging system maintained in the backyards of rural households. Farmers can maintain backyard poultry farming with a minimum land area, integrating it crop cultivation and other livestock species, with minimum manpower. However, it still requires some open space for the flocks to roam and this is the main reason (among others) why backyard chicken farming is not practised in densely populated urban housing areas. The average backyard flock size in Sri Lanka is around 12-15, in comparison to Pakistan (5-10) and Afghanistan (4-15) (Siddiky, 2017). The most common type of birds raised under the backyard poultry farming are known as 'Gam Kukula' (Sinhala) or 'Urkoli' (Tamil) both meaning 'village chicken'. The main objective of this system is to get eggs for household consumption while slaughtering is also done in very limited households. Live birds including chicks or grown birds are sold for breeding and sporting (fighting roosters), respectively. This provides economic benefits for households. This farming tends to be

mostly limited to low-income households in Sri Lanka due to its low input-based nature and it is a feasible alternative for many poor households, which can get both nutritional and economic benefits at a minimal cost.

Backyard farm population is higher in Northern, Eastern, and North Western provinces of Sri Lanka (Department of Animal Production and Health, 2022), where household members are engaged in different roles within the system. One of the major barriers to producing safe backyard poultry is the prevalence of foodborne zoonotic diseases. The lack of biosecurity measures and disease protection methods in backyard poultry systems have mainly triggered the spread of poultry pathogens such as Newcastle Disease (NCD). Even though the majority of the backyard poultry farms in Sri Lanka are registered with regional veterinary offices, many are inconsistent in their maintenance and production. This is a challenge for authorities in controlling the spread of zoonotic diseases in Sri Lanka.

RATIONALE OF THE STUDY

Previous literature on food safety interventions in backyard poultry in Sri Lanka primarily focuses on challenges such as vaccination and biosecurity. However, these studies overlook 'gender role' and its impact on the production. These studies fail to answer the question 'who is being assigned to do the task?' (Harris-Coble



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et al., 2022, pp. 259-276). Thus, there is a noticeable gap in the literature regarding the 'gender' aspect of the backyard poultry system in Sri Lanka. Moreover, poultry production practices and roles of men and women may vary by region which can lead to differences in risks for exposing to pathogens (Garsow *et al.*, 2022). However, the lack of gender segregated data related to backyard poultry farming could be identified as a gap within the Sri Lankan context. Therefore, the main objective of this study is to explore gender roles in the work associated with backyard poultry farming. Secondary objectives include documenting key practices that influence various health hazards with backyard poultry production in Sri Lanka and how they differ based on gender, ethnicity or region.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The economic contribution of backyard poultry farms to households has been well-documented in global studies. According to Das & Samanta (2021), while backyard poultry products guarantee the provision of high-quality animal proteins needed, it has been widely used as an alternative income-generating system for households. Dadheech and Vyas (2014) highlighted that these farms are often an essential element of female-headed households in South Asian countries, despite the presence of some religious taboos. Household labour is commonly used in backyard farms, often leading to the

development of distinct work and power relationships among household members.

The ownership of land and farms is a key component when assessing the gender roles in backyard poultry farming. According to a study conducted in Ghana, both men and women have been involved in backyard poultry farming, but men were more dominant in ownership and management of the farms (Asem-Bansah *et al.*, 2012). In contrast, a qualitative study conducted in Netrokona and Rajshahi in Bangladesh (Sultana *et al.*, 2012) found that the majority of backyard poultry farmers are women. The management of income from the poultry farm also lies in the hands of women, and they are mainly using it for household expenses. Backyard poultry farming improves the skills of women in production management and provides regular income for the household with a little input (Kumar *et al.*, 2021). As highlighted by Guèye (2005) in several African countries, maintenance and management of the poultry farm have become women's responsibilities. Even though women have access to poultry farms, they do not have full control over the production and benefits. Women do not usually have the freedom to make decisions related to consumption, selling, or exchange as they are expected to consult men before making any decision related to poultry. This lack of awareness of women's and men's specific roles in poultry



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production has eventually resulted in 'gender blindness.' Therefore, women's contribution remains 'invisible,' due to insufficient gender-disaggregated data.

In the backyard poultry system, people rear chickens in the immediate vicinity of their houses. Therefore, within such environments, biosecurity measures are a greater concern due to people's continuous interaction with the farms. According to the review of Conan *et al.* (2012) in developing countries, and Bailey & Larson (2013) in the USA, backyard poultry deals with low biosecurity measures, exposing people to diseases. This results in high risk of infectious diseases such as NCD or Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI), even though live birds do not show any sign of illness while carrying the pathogens that can make humans sick. The greatest risk of these diseases is for children, the elderly, pregnant women, and individuals with compromised immune systems (Bailey & Larson, 2013). According to Shanta *et al.* (2017), in Bangladesh, messages to prevent the touching, handling or even eating of sick poultry have been disseminated, yet these guidelines were not followed by backyard poultry farmers, who are predominantly women (99%). That is mainly because even within risky conditions, the animals are the means of financial support for households. Moreover, the message may have not reached rural Bangladesh due to the low accessibility of women to radio and television channels. There is a high risk identified

among the people involved in backyard poultry as they tend not to follow instructions from health authorities to prevent disease transmission (Sultana *et al.*, 2012). However, the relationship between disease risks and gendered-power relations in the Sri Lankan context is not prevalent in the existing literature.

The poultry production in Sri Lanka has also been subjected to multiple studies. The majority of these studies were focused on health and disease prevention in the poultry industry; for instance, microbial studies and counterpart impact studies to prevent Avian Influenza, and NCD. Thus, qualitative research on the Sri Lankan poultry industry, specifically focusing on backyard poultry production is lacking. Since backyard poultry farming is done in households and is highly unregulated, it is closely tied with the socio-cultural dynamics of the Sri Lankan community. As per the literature survey, there are considerably few studies conducted, emphasising the power dynamics, gender roles, and how these gender roles are inter-twined with cultural and ethnic dimensions to affect health and hygiene standards in backyard poultry. Based on the global studies it is evident that the farmers' activities and behaviours may lead to risks in health hazards within the backyard poultry systems, and it is important to address the gendered dimension of such practices and consequences. Thus, a



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comprehensive study is needed to fill this research gap in the subject matter.

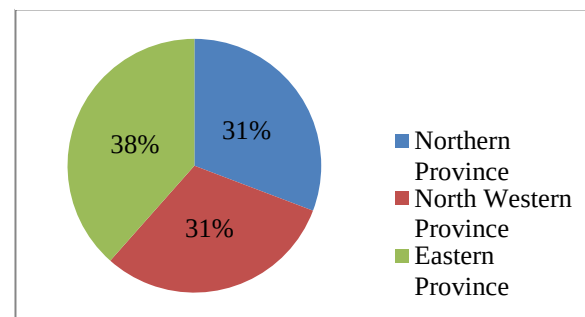
METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study gathered both primary and secondary data through an ethnographic approach. The primary data collection was conducted *via* in-person, semi-structured interviews and observations for case studies while secondary data was collected from published reports by the DAPH and the Department of Census and Statistics (2024a) in Sri Lanka. After a preliminary literature survey, Northern, North Western, and Eastern provinces were selected. Both the Northern and Eastern provinces were selected due to the availability of the highest (81,725) and second highest (37,568) number of registered backyard farms, respectively (Department of Animal Production and Health, 2022) while the North Western province has the highest overall poultry production. There is a multi-ethnic population in those provinces, which provides insight into studying gender from an ethnic perspective.

As units of analysis, a total of 26 farms were selected from three provinces. Regional veterinary officers provided lists of backyard farms in each

province, however not all farms on the lists were in operation. Several new farms were not registered, and some farms could not provide sufficient data. Therefore, snowball sampling had to be adopted to gain more information.

Figure 1: Study Sample by Province



Source: Field Survey, 2023

All the 30 interviewees were directly and actively involved in backyard poultry farming. The interviews were conducted either in Sinhala or Tamil, the respondents' native languages, with the assistance of on-field translators when required. Observations included note-taking, digital photographing, and sketch map drawing, with the consent of the respondents. All the voice recordings were manually transcribed and then manually translated from Sinhala and Tamil into English, ensuring the integrity of the data.



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Figure 2: *Groups of Interviewees*



Source: Field Survey, 2023

The number of interviews was limited to a sample size of 30 and 26 site visits, as it reached the saturation point with the use of the snowball sampling method. Researchers focused on analysing the gender dimensions of the backyard poultry specifically in the above mentioned three provinces without generalising it to the larger context. A descriptive data analysis method was adopted, while thematic analysis was conducted later using a deductive approach. After developing the themes and codes, the transcriptions were coded using MAXQDA 2022 (VERBI Software, 2021). Then, the analysis with cross-tabulations and comparisons was performed using MAXQDA.

RESULTS

Gender Roles

The gender roles (expected behaviours) are socially generated and perpetuated through the complex process of

socialisation. Expected behaviours of males and females are not necessarily related to inherited biological traits, capacities, or skills but they are absolute social constructions. According to theoretical approaches such as Gender and Development (GAD) which became popular since 1980s, women's empowerment was highlighted while understanding them as a heterogeneous group. This approach emphasised the nature of women's contribution to the work done both inside and outside of the household (Momsen, 2020). This approach provided major insights to understand the gender roles in backyard farming in Sri Lanka as it highlights the importance of understanding the relationship between males and females as well as how society influences their respective roles within the private sphere of the household.

Backyard poultry farming is an integral part of many semi-urban and rural



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households in Sri Lanka where gender-specific activities are assigned to males and females. The work done in the backyard poultry farms can be identified relating to who is involved in what kind of work based on the temporal aspect. The activities done by men in the farms include the construction and repairing and disinfection and deep cleaning of the coops, slaughtering if they have any birds raised for meat, and removing carcasses of dead birds. This kind of work, even though they appear heavier and strenuous than others, is done by men occasionally, or through outsourcing. Women are involved in a vast range of daily activities, including feeding the birds, replenishing water several times a day, sweeping around the coops, collecting eggs, making meals out of the poultry products, identifying sick birds, and ensuring the safety of the birds from predatory animals throughout the day. It is important to note that the poultry-related tasks performed by women are hardly ever outsourced; therefore, they cannot take leave or postpone performing these tasks. Some common activities done by both genders include buying medicine, vitamins and feed for the birds, taking sick birds to the veterinary office or nearby clinic, and transporting feed from shops to the farms. However, in the Northern and North Western province, most Tamil women and some Sinhala women had been doing these tasks by themselves, without depending on the males to do it for their farms.

In the study areas among all three ethnic groups, both nuclear families and extended families were identified to be involved in backyard poultry farming. The number of extended families was relatively higher within the Sinhala households. In such instances, the other members of the household are also involved in different types of work in the poultry farms. For example, children or the grandchildren of the farm owners assist with general tasks. At the same time, other males in the households help the females with tasks which require more physical strength, while females help the each other to complete the day-to-day tasks mentioned above. Only two farm owners from the sample have hired labourers for the work in the backyard farms. Those owners with nuclear families tend to have a relatively stronger financial background where they had other income sources. The hired labourers had been assigned with daily tasks related to poultry farms. The labourers identified from the study areas were temporarily working for a daily or monthly wage who acknowledged their wages as a relatively fair wage compared to their previous working experiences.

Power Relations

The ownership of backyard poultry farms in Sri Lanka was identified as male-owned, female-owned, and family-owned/ uncertain. They could be further divided based on the nature



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of the ownership of the farm and/or the land. For example, in most instances the male of the household tends to own the land, but the female head is the owner of the farm, as females are the ones who are registered at the regional veterinary offices as the beneficiaries. This was the most common scenario in all the three districts among the three ethnic groups. There were relatively less number of respondents, who had the ownership of both farm and land, and it was prevalent in many households from the Northern province. Some farms were initiated through personal investments, while others have been started under government-sponsored initiatives. Samurdhi, is one such state-governed social welfare project in Sri Lanka, which provides funding to families to establish backyard chicken farms in their names, intervening in farm ownership dynamics. Furthermore, there were gender-based differences prevalent among the three main ethnic groups related to ownership. In the Tamil community, women own most of the backyard farms. Among the Sinhalese, generally men own backyard farms, while among Muslims, mostly men own farms while widowed women have claimed ownership later. Among the Sinhalese, ownership and labour exhibit complex interconnections. Some women tend to believe that their husbands own the farm, solely because the male provides funds for farm along with the land, even though most of the work is done by the women themselves. Therefore, it

is evident that among the Sinhala community, land ownership is assigned mostly to men, while farm ownership is held under the women's names. In Tamil community, both land and farm ownership tends to be under women's control. Whereas in the Muslim community, males have the legal power over both land and farms.

Mainly, decision-making is done by the owner, regardless of ethnicity or gender. Mostly, in female-owned farms, the owner is the decision-maker regarding farm production and management farm production and management, as they do all the work on the farm. Furthermore, the wives of male owners among Sinhalese often depend on their husbands in decision-making, engage in tasks, and make decisions on nutritional needs of children, but not the commercial aspect of backyard poultry farming, indicating the degree of ownership and access to information on decision-making.

In all ethnic groups, owners of both genders have access to information. The information related to starting new farms, maintenance, medicine, and vaccination of birds is disseminated by the regional veterinary offices through meetings held at village level. Specifically in the Tamil community, the owners follow the provided information, make decisions, and hence engage with all the work. In most cases, the Sinhalese wives of farm owners lack knowledge about even the main tasks related to backyard chicken rearing



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because they only play supportive roles. This is also well connected with ownership, decision-making, and practical engagement.

Veterinary Care, Health, and Hygiene

Veterinary care, health and hygiene are important components which need to be essentially maintained within a backyard poultry system. The stationing of the chicken coops is one such important factor related to health and hygiene. According to observations, in all three provinces chicken coops had been built and maintained up to a considerably good standard providing shelter and safety for birds, from weather conditions and predatory animals. Notably, in the Northern province, the Tamil women have separated the backyard poultry farms from their own houses by building wooden fences and covering it up with nets. However, in many Sinhalese and Muslim households, the coops were located much closer; around five to ten metres away from the main house. As the backyard poultry system is a free range, scavenging system chickens tend to roam all over the place, sometimes even trespassing the house. In Eastern province, some coops were attached to the house's wall itself. Most of the old houses in the study area had detached toilets and washrooms, only two to five metres away from the coops which were intruded by roaming birds in search of feed and water. Some houses from the Northern provinces had wells

in their compound, which were not covered, and chicken feathers could be identified floating on the water, denoting the contamination of the water source. Due to farms' proximity to the houses, as well as due to the birds' movement about the house and its compound, it is evident that there is a higher chance of spreading of zoonotic diseases.

Based on the farming experiences, farmers tend to identify the sick birds through their behaviours. Then the sick birds are kept in a separate coop or a small room and mostly women tend to identify those sick birds as they watch the birds regularly. Occasionally farmers purchase medicine over the counter by explaining the symptoms, use prescriptions, or consider the advice of a well-experienced neighbour. However, the veterinary surgeons' involvement in treating and assisting sick birds is notable in all the three study areas. The officials conduct seminars before distributing birds to the farmers and respond to farmers through short message services as well. The following statement made by a male, farmworker from Kilinochchi explains the stakeholders' degree of involvement in backyard poultry.

"If four or five chickens go [die] in a row like this, sir [male owner of the farm] will inform the doctor [veterinary surgeon] immediately and then the doctor comes and checks." (INT02, Male Worker, Northern Province)



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Other than the prescribed medicine, farm owners tend to generally use a range of natural herbs as traditional treatments to treat the mild illnesses of the birds. The most common remedies include turmeric, neem, ghee, garlic, and black pepper. Grinding turmeric and neem into a paste and applying it on birds is a remedy passed down generations to treat fowl pox. However, farmers tend to rely more on Western medicine and the veterinary surgeon's treatment to treat the sick birds.

The most prevalent health risk associated with backyard farming is the transmission of infectious diseases from birds to humans. According to Bailey & Larson (2013), any live poultry or poultry product can carry pathogens such as *Salmonella* and *Campylobacter* causes greatest risk for humans causing diarrhoea. Also, Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI) could cause fatal consequences in both poultry and human (Conan *et al.* 2012). In the study area, it was evident that women are more concerned about the hygiene and the effect the farm might have on the health of the family. Use of safety gears and instruments within backyard poultry farms seem to be less among the farmers. They had hand gloves, masks, and shovels for cleaning purposes, yet their use was not prominently visible. Several practices of both genders from all three ethnic groups visualised unhygienic and risky behaviours which would accelerate the transmission of poultry diseases to humans. Face masks and men's razors

were seen hanging on the coop nets, and roaming birds' droppings and stains were seen inside some houses, creating a germ-infested environment. Women who were primarily responsible for daily cleaning and collection of eggs, tend to be exposed to health risks as they touch the coops and eggs most of the time without masks or gloves. They barely wash their hands thoroughly after such work, raising concerns about cleanliness as they could transmit zoonotic diseases while preparing the meals and touching other household equipment. Comparatively Sinhalese women tend to be more concerned about cleanliness and health issues, but their hygienic practices are not up to standard to minimise the potential risks of the spread of diseases. Therefore, it is evident that different activities done by men and women in the backyard poultry farming are creating health risks to themselves as well as to the other household members.

Financial Management

At the initial stage backyard poultry farmers have to allocate substantial funds for the construction of poultry infrastructure, the purchase of necessary equipment, and the process of obtaining or purchasing Day Old Chicks (DOCs). Apart from poultry farming, households often diversify their income sources, contributing to a composite family income. The allocation of these funds and the decisions associated with it, become a



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critical aspect, maintaining a balance between meeting the day-to-day needs of the family, and other potential investments. This complex interaction between investments, income sources, and family financial dynamics highlights the nuanced landscape of financial management in the Sri Lankan backyard poultry industry. The initial investment tends to be initiated by societal expectations of masculinity, reinforcing traditional gender norms. This decision-making related to finances and investments influences the dynamics of power within the household, emphasising the gendered division in decision-making. The latent function of this gendered investment pattern can result in unequal access to and control over resources will potentially impact the women's agency in decision-making processes related to poultry farming.

Farmers representing all the provinces explained the availability of other sources of income, mainly cultivation, and other micro-business ventures. Even though backyard farming was mentioned as the main household income for few farmers, they often have other sources to avoid the economic uncertainties they might face. It may allow for a degree of economic autonomy, providing individuals, especially women, with alternative means to contribute financially and potentially challenge existing power imbalance within the household.

In Sri Lankan households, patriarchal norms dictate the division of financial

responsibilities based on gender roles. In most cases, men take charge of managing the financial aspects of backyard poultry farming, as it aligns with social expectations and reinforces traditional gender norms. This situation is different with the women poultry farmers in the Northern province as they tend to have more control over the decisions regarding the investments and financing of the farm. Women who, if and when they earn something from the backyard farms and have the authority to "manage" the finances by themselves, spend it either on the farm itself (buying feed, buying medicine for the sick chicken, or improving the poultry infrastructure) or most importantly, on providing/purchasing family needs. Hardly anyone spent the money on herself, on individual wants. Some women used the money to take care of their sick husbands, and elderly parents, and buy educational necessities for children. Despite many women being responsible for multiple invisible work, they can also be identified as a group of unpaid workers within this system who lack financial independence.

Benefits

The backyard poultry sector in Sri Lanka has significant economic benefits for people who live in resource-constrained environments. Women of all ethnicities allocate the income from farm to their families, and invest in the farm itself rather than spending it on themselves individually. If it is the



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primary source of income, it always serves the entire family. According to the respondents, the average income from selling eggs to the locals would range from LKR. 1000- 2000 per week. This is mainly because eggs are primarily taken for household consumption while trading is done only when there is surplus production. However, given the inflated economic status of the country, this amount is not sufficient to fulfil even the necessities of many families with three or more members.

Health and nutritional benefits are a major concern when starting or maintaining backyard farms. The primary purpose of the backyard poultry sector in Sri Lanka is the egg supply. Some farms have been established solely for the children's nutrition and farm owners with children emphasised their intention to provide eggs for their children. In Sri Lanka, meat production being the primary purpose of the backyard poultry sector is very rare. Sinhalese (Buddhists) view chickens as pets, some even comparing them to children. Most Tamils (Hindus) also have a similar perspective, not taking chickens for meat. While some Tamil farm owners take their birds for meat, their spouses or children strongly oppose killing the chickens and consuming the meat.

"No. No. [I/we] don't eat. If [I] cook, [...] my son doesn't eat. He doesn't allow [me] to slaughter the chickens

which were raised in [our] home."
(INT04, Female, Northern Province)

Buddhism, emphasising non-violence, and compassion significantly influences dietary practices, often discouraging meat consumption. It is interesting to note that Buddhists consider it fine to consume meat as long as they are not the ones slaughtering the animals, because of the belief that what is sinful is the act of killing, and not eating meat. Hindus avoid consumption of any type of meat or egg on Fridays due to the rituals associated while attending Kovils on the said day. However, Muslims do not exhibit any restraining dietary preferences related to poultry products. The sentimental attachment, leads to low meat consumption among backyard poultry sector farm owners in Sri Lanka.

DISCUSSION

Gender Roles

The gender roles associated with backyard poultry have some shared characteristics among all ethnic groups. Males tend to be involved with occasional while females share a common set of daily activities, which are essential for the continuation and maintenance of the farming system. In Sri Lanka where patriarchy reigns, women are entrusted as homemakers, and they are expected to provide and look after the needs of household members. They are bound by culturally and socially assigned responsibilities



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and society expects them to work harder to fulfil those responsibilities. Farm work and daily household chores doubles her burden with load of invisible work. In this scenario, females become unpaid workers, otherwise which should be paid enough if they outsource. It is evident that, by the first quarter of 2024, 11.4 percent of females are recognised as unpaid family workers in Sri Lanka while the percentage for male was only 2.2 percent. (Department of Census and Statistics, 2024b). As discussed in Marxist feminism, most of these women are likely to be in a disadvantageous position within a capitalist society. The main reason is that they are unpaid workers who might face issues due to the economic dependence on the male of the household. The socio-economic condition of the family exacerbated by financial issues is another reason for women to dedicate considerable amount of their daily life into backyard poultry farming. Generally, in all three communities, women prefer to manage backyard poultry farming while engaging in other household chores. This leads to the contraction of women's capabilities and service to household due to limited opportunities to expand the socio-economic independence. This private sphere has become convenient for them rather than spending their time on another job.

However, there are some slight differences in the roles of men and

women due to ethno-religious implications as well. Specifically, women from the previously war-affected areas in the Northern province who belong to the Tamil community tend to show more involvement in terms of their decision making and this is due to the impacts of war on their lives and the exposure to hardships. Some of the Sinhalese and Muslim women from North Western and Eastern provinces tend to be independent in the industry, yet there is a higher dependence on the males of the family. Similar to Tamil women, Sinhalese and Muslim women too play an active role in the poultry farms, shouldering the roles associated with them. However, the female gender roles of the latter two communities tend to be submerged by the prominence given to the males' roles within backyard poultry farming even though women do most of the routine, monotonous and essential work. This is evident as women from North Western and Eastern provinces tend to voluntarily seek the consultation of males before making decisions related to the farm as a result of cultural influence. Nevertheless, irrespective of ethnicity, the sense of responsibility towards the farm as a source of income generative entity for family plays a decisive part on gender roles.

Power Relations

Generally, power relations are highly influenced by culture. For instance, the wives of male farm owners among



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Sinhalese were reluctant to accept ownership and named the husband as the owner. Their reactions appear to be influenced by Sinhala cultural beliefs towards husband-wife interactions where a prominent place is given to husband within the family. Social norms in the traditional Sinhalese community often mandate wives to live under their husbands signifying the patriarchal social structure, where men hold more power compared to women. Buddhism also teaches that wives should safeguard and prudently spend their husbands' earnings, while husbands should provide for their families (Singalovada Sutta). Therefore, many Sinhalese men tend to put a lot of effort to maximise income sources of the household, by involving in paid jobs as well as managing poultry farms as an extra source of income. However, within the farms, females tend to shoulder a heavier responsibility, yet they consider their husbands or the male head of the household as the owner. In a previous study conducted in the Western province of Sri Lanka, very few women were reported to be the primary owners of poultry and both men and women played the roles of caretakers (Alahakoon *et al.*, 2016). But in contrast, the Tamil women from the Northern province may have become independent in backyard poultry farming due to their past experiences of thirty years of war, the desire to rebuild their livelihoods after the war, the unavailability of jobs, the insufficient salaries of their spouses, and lack of land for crop cultivation. In general, the

husbands of female farm owners work outside the home or are deceased. This absence of husbands at home seems to increase women's ownership. In all three communities, the cultural perspectives of gender roles in the family and traditional social norms for husband-wife relationships have affected power relations.

Veterinary Care, Health, and Hygiene

The women who are involved in backyard poultry farming in Sri Lanka are vigilant about the sicknesses and changes in their birds. Despite the time they spend in backyard poultry farming, women have less awareness about the prescribed medicine for each disease or generic names of the vitamins. This question the levels of knowledge of the women who are involved in farming, nevertheless women tend to continue to involve and contribute to the backyard poultry farming within their capacity. However, both male and female farmers who are involved in backyard poultry farming in Sri Lanka are knowledgeable about the traditional medicine as they have been passed down through generations. The religious and cultural background of Sinhalese and Tamils are represented in the use of neem and turmeric, which are strong natural disinfectants used for ages. Still, the use of traditional medicine holds a prominent role in backyard poultry farming along with the use of Western medicine prescribed by veterinary surgeons. This is mainly



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because traditional medicines are very common spices and herbs that could be found in almost in the kitchen as well and everywhere in a village. Farmers do not have to spend any money for such traditional medicine; therefore it has been popular among the farmers in all the three provinces.

Irrespective of the ethnic group, the majority of the elderly people such as grandparents mostly tend to keep the small children away from the coops and farms, showing greater concerns about the health and hygiene of the children. As Whitehead and Roberts (2014) have emphasised several methods of protection against the most common zoonotic diseases and among them, the basics are to maintain good hand and kitchen hygiene. Therefore, this shows that some farmers are concerned and aware that touching and treading are two ways that diseases could be communicated to humans. Both men and women claim to do the cleaning, but it is evident that everyday cleaning is mostly done by females while rigorous deep cleaning is done by men occasionally. In Sri Lanka, everyday cleaning is identified as a stereotype gender role assigned to women. Children are socialised into witness and believe that tasks such as cleaning as well as care work is for women, thus the continuation of gender roles takes place throughout generations due to the cultural impact. In terms of hygiene, due to the concepts of cleanliness associated with the Gods of Hinduism, Tamil women tend to

keep their farms clean with specifically allocated places for each activity. This was evident in some Sinhalese households as well in the North Western province due to female heads' concern about cleanliness. However, in general, the Muslim community were much less concerned about hygiene as most coops were located in very close proximity to the house which is resulted from congested households with more family members and location of houses closer to each other.

Financial Management

Upon analysing initial investment in backyard poultry farming in Sri Lanka, insights influenced by underlying dynamics are revealed through a gender lens. In this context, these dynamics are manifested through gender roles and social expectations. Male farm owners from all the provinces referred to the initially invested money as 'my money' and the female farm owners referred to it as 'my husband's money' highlighting the degree of financial contribution along with male's influence in the backyard poultry farming. The Tamil women from the Northern province showed greater independence in managing the finances coming from the farm compared to the Western and North-Eastern provinces. It had given them greater authority in household management as well. The power dynamics in each province not only affected the gender-based inequalities in financial contributions but also



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reinforces the broader patriarchal structure.

Benefits

A "good father or mother" is considered responsible for providing for children. In Buddhism, children are considered the ultimate treasure, while in Hinduism, they are seen as gifts from God. In Islam, children are viewed as gifts from Allah and as the path to heaven for parents. Each religion prioritises children and recognises the responsibility of parents. This cultural influence is strongly related to the social element discussed earlier. The cultural expectations of women to be housewives, feed the family, and manage the finances have been the foundation for the small community of female poultry producers and buyers. The women who own the farms are mostly housewives, who practise chicken rearing as they are at home, representing the producers and sellers. Most of the buyers are also women since women in the Sri Lankan community make decisions about what to prepare for meals and manage kitchen supplies. The country's economic situation has ultimately influenced the distribution of benefits. Backyard poultry farming proves to be a financially low-risk system with little or low-investment in production inputs (Desta, 2021; Nyoni *et al.*, 2019), as the majority of households in the study area which were from the lower middle and working classes, with monthly incomes below LKR. 60,000. Due to

their limited financial resources, they prioritise the needs of children, while adults only acquire the necessities for survival. Additionally, the reliance on unpaid family labour and the primary focus on household consumption indicate a lack of capital for farm owners.

CONCLUSION

The backyard poultry farming plays a crucial role in providing financial and nutritional benefits to many households in Sri Lanka. Gender-based divisions of labour are prominent, but there is also evidence of women's independence in decision-making and financial management. Moreover, there is a need to address the lack of hygienic knowledge and practices among both genders and all three ethnic groups, as well as the risk of zoonotic diseases associated with poultry farming. To improve the practice of backyard poultry farming, it is essential to involve women at all stages of production, which will not only empower them but also enhance the livelihoods of individuals and households.

Acknowledgement

The study was sponsored by the UKRI GCRF One Health Poultry Hub grant (13-35-16-20-02) offered through the Royal Veterinary College, London, UK.



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