



Why gender matters in controlling infectious diseases from chickens

This brief considers the factors influencing the different ways in which women and men chicken farmers and traders work. It offers evidence-backed ways to lower the disease risks they face.



A woman feeds her chickens with mixed feed in Hai Duong province. Photo: Pham Thi Thu Ha.

Background

Women and men working on chicken farms and in poultry trading in Vietnam practise their activities very differently. The ways in which they work is shaped by gender – the varying roles, behaviours and identities they assume that have been shaped by social and cultural norms by virtue of their biological sex. Diseases that spread from animals to people (zoonoses) and threaten human health, such as avian influenza, are linked closely to gender-based practices. As such, they place women and men at different levels of health risks. These different practices can drive people toward helpful or harmful behaviours. However, gender is often neglected in public health responses and in formulating the policies and interventions for disease prevention and control. This policy brief focuses on the interactions between gender and health risks in chicken farming and trading in Vietnam. It analyses the social, economic and cultural factors that influence the different ways in which women and men access resources, practise their work and observe good biosecurity and food safety measures. Using a One Health¹ framing, it suggests gender-sensitive policies and interventions are best to help manage the health risks associated with chicken farming and trading and ensure the sustainability of Vietnam's chicken sector.

Policy messages

- **Base public health interventions on gender-need assessments.** This recognises the negotiations and compromises that take place between women and men and can be more effective than focusing on radical change supporting women's rights given the context of Vietnam today.
- **Support small-scale chicken businesses.** These are often women-run and use alternative medicine to maintain biosecurity and control health risks. Supporting such enterprises could have a double win in promoting both women's empowerment and disease prevention and management.
- **Improve all-round market conditions.** Better personal, market and environmental hygiene as well as monitoring of slaughtering are essential to prevent disease, improve the health of people working in markets and ensure food safety.

The research



We undertook a study exploring gendered practices in chicken production and distribution and health risk. It comprised six focus group discussions, 30 key informant interviews and a survey of 132 people working in the chicken industry. We worked in north Vietnam, June 2022 to June 2023.

Access to resources

In Vietnam, social norms are embedded in custom and laws affect who can access the main resources in chicken farming and trading. This includes land and stalls or shops, financial resources, and information and knowledge.

Our research showed that men are usually the owners of chicken enterprises, having their name registered on certificates of land use, chicken stalls or shops. Although since land law revision in 2003, women and men can claim equally in inheriting land and other assets from their parents, the administrative procedure for this is complicated and costly. As a result, the customary practice of moving to the husband's house when a women gets married persists and the traditions for inheritance still favour sons rather than daughters.

Because of the gender differences in accessing land and stalls or shops, women are also limited in accessing formal financial resources as they lack the necessary collateral. Our research showed it is mostly men who borrow money formally from banks and take credit from agents (mostly feed and drug dealers). Women mostly borrow from informal sources (such as relatives or friends). As a result, women tend to self-fund their business, preparing their financial resources to do so in advance of setting up, and preferring small or medium-size businesses. Many women restrict the size of their business and arrange family labour so there is no need to bring in hired workers.

Our research also showed that men are largely responsible for transporting chickens as they own the necessary means for transportation, such as trucks, cars or motorcycles. Access to modern vehicles tends to favour men. Women say they do not own these vehicles and do not know how to use them.

Both women and men in chicken farming and trading need information, experience and skills to succeed. Our survey results showed that both men and women rely on their learning from their experiences in the chicken business as well as from family, friends, media such as books and newspapers, veterinary services and companies. However, men tend to actively seek out information more than women do.

Work and decision-making

In farming

Our research showed that the gender division of work in chicken production is based largely on size and type of chicken farm. Men tend to control bigger businesses while women make decisions in small-scale businesses. Our interviews highlighted how women farmers choose semi-industrial farming because industrial methods require rigid technical processes which if not applied would put the chickens at risk of respiratory and intestinal diseases. In open housing systems for chickens, the birds can adapt well to changing conditions and are healthier.

Sharing farm work and joint decision-making between husband and wife are common across farm sizes. Data showed that women participate actively in all stages of raising chickens, and in particular in daily-care tasks such as preparing food and water, cleaning housing and sprinkling lime to disinfect. It is mainly men who make decisions on borrowing money and choose farm production size or technique.

However, our study also found that 83% of women keep the money from chicken production, while only 58% of male farmers do this. This allows women some degree of freedom in managing family finances and compensating for the hard housework and dependence our interviews revealed they also experience. However, control of money also depends to a large extent on the size of household production: the person undertaking

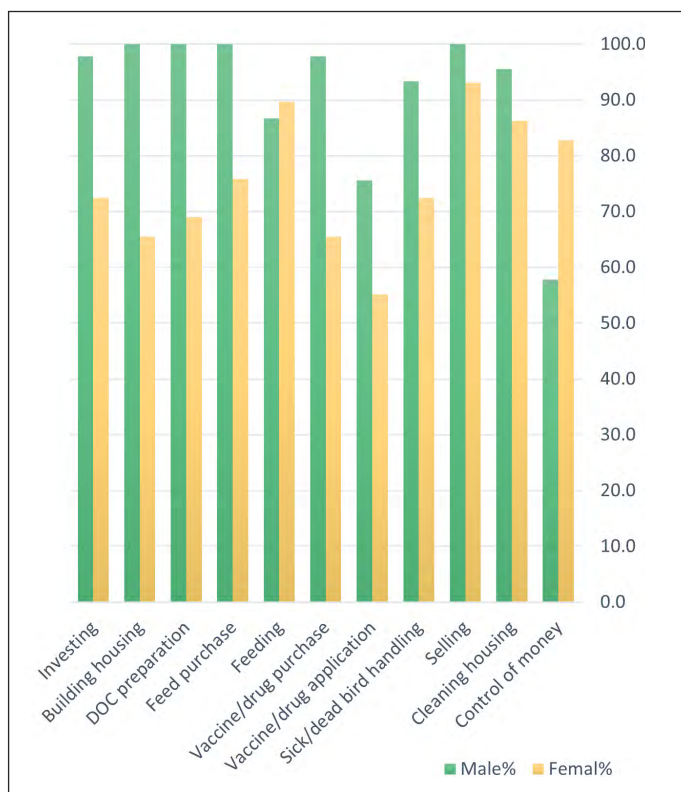


Figure 1: Labour division in chicken production

the main work in chicken production being the one controlling the money. And as men usually own big farms, men control the flow of bigger finances.

In trading

In trading, women often run small shops while bigger businesses often need the cooperation of both husband and wife. Chicken traders often trade the whole year, only breaking for a few days during the Tet festival. As a result, traders need good arrangements among family members for working shifts or doing housework, including men undertaking tasks.

Our data showed that in chicken trading, women participate and make decisions in small, daily tasks such as selling, taking care of chickens and keeping money from the business. In contrast, men carry the main responsibilities of buying and transporting birds.

At wholesale markets, chicken trading and especially slaughtering is often a night-time activity. Our research showed men mostly undertake the night work while women take turns at day shifts. Men complain that

working at night affects their health, though the lack of sanitary conditions in live bird markets present potential health risks for both men and women.

In both raising and trading birds, women spend more time on business and household chores than men. However, they report they are 'satisfied' with this. Women also say they are satisfied with the opportunity to access capital and their control over their income, and accept that their husbands are dominant. Many Vietnamese women still accord to traditional behaviour and appreciate the intra-family peace this brings. For example, even if women are the main earners, they believe that men are the breadwinners and they are willing to do more housework or have less decision-making power than their husband.

How does gender affect health risks?

WOMEN

Farmers Women often make decisions with security in mind, employing strategies to overcome financial difficulties and avoid dependence on credit. They raise hen broilers for hot-pot restaurants rather than cock broilers as hens have the shorter production cycle and are thus cheaper to raise. The shorter production duration, which means the birds can avoid some diseases, also favours this choice. Women also prefer smaller business sizes (<2,000 birds per cycle), as it enables the use of alternatives to antibiotics such as garlic and herbs, which means the birds do not contain antibiotic residues. Women use mixed feed and open chicken housing, and claim their farms have good biosecurity and the mixed feed is nutritious. Open housing means the birds are less stressed and stronger as they are free to scavenge. Other agricultural activities are often also combined with chicken production. All these practices help women with little capital sustain their farms and cope with market fluctuations and disease.

Traders In both wholesale and retail live bird markets, women are mostly sellers. They spend eight to 10 hours a day in the market and have limited equipment to protect them from the poor hygienic conditions. Stalls or shops are close to each other and disease is easily transmitted. Women traders spend longer hours than men in live bird markets, including in contact with the birds, and they report health issues, including breathing problems, flu and skin issues. Traders are highly mobile and disease transmission is considered high in the market. Pressure for profit can lead to bad practices, including failing to report infections. Women who work in slaughter points face health risks linked to the very early morning hours they must work, having their hands in cold water for long hours and poor sanitary conditions.

MEN

Farmers Men tend to run big farms (<10,000 chickens per cycle) and prefer to raise the more valuable cocks. However, the longer production duration for cocks means there is a greater risk of disease, especially in the tropical and changing weather conditions of north Vietnam. Male farm owners often make use of credit facilities, mostly with feed dealers. They tend to use industrial feed and drugs, rather than alternative medicine or mixed feed, and they invest in modern technologies. As a result, some become rich and successful. However, others become debt-ridden and have to give up their farms. Evidence also shows that using industrial feed and the overuse of antibiotics comes with potential public health risks.²

Traders Men are normally responsible for collecting chickens from farms to deliver to markets, with some men collecting birds from farms and delivering to several retailers (up to seven different points, in our research). This high level of mobility leads to higher risk of disease. However, male traders report health issues mostly related to traffic accidents and lung cancer due to high cigarette consumption to avoid their sleepiness at night.

Towards gender-sensitive policies



Although Vietnam law recognises the entitlement of land and other assets for both men and women, law enforcement is complex. Improving procedures to increase the opportunities for women to access land and practice their land rights, and avoid risks when marriages break down, would help to support women in chicken production.

Women's workload is great but their acceptance of this is a rational one. Vietnamese women exchange family harmony for lost opportunities. The high numbers of women keeping money shows women both manage family finances and have a certain level of freedom in compensation for their heavy workload. Interventions to enhance women's status should therefore recognise the reality of this gender negotiation within Vietnamese families rather than implement radical changes supporting women rights.

However, livestock policies that are gender sensitive and have equity in mind will improve livelihoods, economic outcomes and public health. Arguments can be for and against the differing ways in which women and men practise farming but it is the case that women participate to a great degree in small- and medium-sized chicken farms in Vietnam and that they demonstrate good production practices, including those that work for the environment. Supporting greater female participation in small-scale chicken businesses could lead to higher levels of alternative medicine use (rather than use of antibiotics and drugs), and good maintenance of biosecurity – and so a double win for both women's empowerment and disease control.

Women spend more time trading than men. Better work protection tools and hygiene conditions in live bird markets are needed to prevent disease and improve the health status of all people working in markets. The high number of both men and women working in slaughter points with little space, low hygiene levels and low-tech equipments results in poor food safety and strong competition with slaughterhouses with better hygiene conditions. Stronger regulation of slaughtering will ensure food safety and lower health risks for all.



A woman and man involved in chicken trading at Ha Vy market, Thuong Tin, Hanoi. Photo: Nguyen Thi Dien.

Further information

The GCRF One Health Poultry Hub is an impact-driven research and development programme working to help meet Asia's growing demand for chicken meat and eggs while minimising risk to local and global public health. This research was carried out under Work Package One of the Hub, in Hanoi, Hai Duong and Bac Giang provinces. Data was collected through six group discussions, 30 in-depth interviews and a survey of 132 people in the chicken production and distribution networks of these provinces. It was carried out from September 2022 to June 2023.

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Footnotes

1. Taking sex and gender into account in emerging infectious disease programmes: an analytical framework. WHO Regional Office for the Western Pacific. 2011.
2. Antibiotic use in agriculture and its consequential resistance in environmental sources: Potential public health implications. *Molecules*. 2018 Mar 30;23(4):795.