

# **Traditional Poultry Production Systems and the Role of Women in Parts of Western India**

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Backyard poultry production is traditional in most rural and peri-urban areas of India, particularly in some communities. Until about 15 years ago, it contributed the major share of the total poultry production in India but is now reduced to 25%.

Studies were carried out in a number of clusters of villages in under-developed pockets of Western India, involving a variety of communities. Observations were gathered through repeated small group discussions and participatory exercises.

Discussions and participatory exercises were conducted with more than 1000 families to understand the poultry production system, the perceptions and priorities of women and find suggestions for improvement.

Almost 80% of rural families, from the under-privileged group and Muslim community were found to keep backyard poultry in numbers varying from 6 to 20. Seventy-five per cent of families kept 6-12 birds. In about 70% of the families, the entire operation, from feeding and management to marketing, was handled by women. Feeding and management of the birds was entirely looked after by women in more than 95% cases. The sale of eggs and birds from the household (where middlemen or individual buyers come to purchase) was by women, irrespective of socio-economic class. Selling of eggs and birds in village markets was by men in some communities and higher socio-economic groups. However, among lower socio-economic strata groups, it was

common to see women selling eggs and birds in weekly markets.

There is a good demand for the products (eggs and birds) and they command higher market prices than the commercially produced equivalents. Except in summer, the backyard egg or bird gets double the price of commercial eggs and poultry. During festival seasons, it is even higher. Frizzle fowl and fighting cocks fetch very high prices in the market.

The objectives and outputs of poultry keeping are multiple and their ranking varies from area to area, community to community and between men and women. Based on the average of rankings by families from different areas of the study, the objectives and products are indicated in Table 1.

**Table 1.**

Objective	Product
1. Small cash - regular income	1. Bird
2. Entertaining guests and festivities	2. Egg
3. Cheap source of nutrition for the family	3. Chicks

The relative importance of birds or eggs as products for sale varies from region to region. About 20% of families were found to be involved in the production of chicks using brooding hens.

These perceptions have implications for planning interventions and extension programmes.

Almost 90% of the families were in favour of keeping coloured country fowl and the major reasons for the choice were:

1. Easy to manage
2. Low external inputs
3. Good market demand/price
4. The country fowl can protect itself well against predators
5. The adult country fowl has good resistance to disease

Feeding of backyard poultry is a good example of the recycling of household and farm wastes, and the use of naturally occurring resources. Women devise innovative ways of using waste products. Grain and grain by-products are usually offered as supplements to the birds.

A variety of poultry housing systems were observed in different regions. These ranged from crudely constructed houses, to bamboo baskets, wire mesh or bamboo cages placed in the backyard, to innovative systems of putting bamboo or wooden cages on tree tops, wooden poles or along the roof. Saving the birds from predators is the major objective of these innovations. Birds are trained to climb or fly over to the cages, placed on trees - or are manually picked up and put there.

The results of the ranking of constraints indicates the most serious problem to be losses at the chick stage, which are about 30%. However, losses among adults are only about 7%. Newcastle disease and lack of facilities for vaccination are the main reasons for losses in chicks. Nutritional deficiency and coccidiosis could be other causes of loss. These aspects need critical study. The second constraint is losses due to predation by birds and animals (also neighbours).

The suggestions made for improving productivity according to the average of ranking in different areas and groups were:

1. Control of losses of chicks due to diseases
2. Help in improving housing
3. Marketing linkage

From the development and environment viewpoint, most facets of traditional backyard poultry production are favourable. While commercial poultry has its place and contributes to growth in production, there is the risk of abuse of resources and marginalisation of small farmers. Commercial poultry is a good example of mass production and rapid growth, but should be differentiated from development and production by the masses. A comparative picture of the various facets of the two poultry production systems is presented from a rural development viewpoint in Table 2.

**Table 2.**

Facets of production systems	Traditional and backyard system.	Commercial system
1. External inputs	Low	High
2. Dependency on outside agencies	Low	High
3. Outputs	Low	High
4. Involvement of small farmer and women	High	Low
5. Risks	Low	High
6. Effect on environment	Positive	May be negative
7. Biodiversity	Promoted	Adversely effected
8. Competition with human food, like grains	Very low	High

There is a need for marketing linkage, extension and training for women and the development of paravet groups, which would be useful in controlling losses and improving productivity and profits. Attempts are being made to develop womens' groups in some tribal areas of Rajasthan and Gujarat and a detailed study of the nutritional status of birds is being attempted. The observations indicate the need to critically study feeding practices and available feed materials for the birds and to suggest suitable, locally available supplements.