

Empowering Women through Family Poultry Production

Arun Kumar Panda*, Biswanath Sahoo and Bhikari Charan Behera

ICAR-Central Institute for Women in Agriculture, Bhubaneswar, Odisha 751003, India

Corresponding Author

Arun Kumar Panda

Email: akpanda59@gmail.com



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ABSTRACT

Family poultry production is a low-input, sustainable enterprise that enhances nutritional security, livelihood opportunities, and women's empowerment in rural areas. By providing eggs, meat, and supplementary income, it helps alleviate poverty and malnutrition among resource-poor households. Adoption of improved breeds, balanced feeding, healthcare, and capacity building can significantly increase productivity, profitability, and socio-economic well-being of rural women and their families.

INTRODUCTION

Poultry production has emerged as one of India's fastest-growing agricultural sectors, transforming from traditional backyard systems to a highly organized and technology-driven industry. The availability of high-yielding layer and broiler strains, along with improved nutrition, housing, management, and disease-control practices, has enabled annual growth rates of 6–8% in egg production and 10–12% in broiler production. Despite this progress, the consumption of eggs and poultry meat remains far below the recommended levels of 180 eggs

and 10.8 kg meat per person per year. A major disparity exists between urban and rural consumption patterns. Although nearly 70% of India's population lives in rural areas, most commercial poultry production is concentrated in urban and peri-urban regions. Urban populations consume the majority of eggs and poultry meat, while rural people have limited access due to poor availability and low purchasing power. Consequently, malnutrition remains a significant concern in many rural and tribal communities.

Family poultry farming offers an effective solution to improve both nutritional security and livelihoods. Traditionally practiced by small, marginal, landless, tribal, and scheduled caste households, backyard poultry requires minimal investment and utilizes locally available resources. Birds forage naturally and provide a steady supply of eggs and meat for household consumption as well as additional income through the sale of surplus produce. Importantly, poultry farming plays a vital role in women's empowerment. Income generated from poultry enhances women's economic independence, social status, and participation in household decision-making (Panda *et al.*, 2022). Therefore, promoting low-input and free-range poultry farming in rural, tribal, and underdeveloped areas can significantly contribute to poverty reduction, nutritional improvement, sustainable livelihood development and women empowerment.

Importance of Family Poultry Production

Family poultry refers to small-scale poultry rearing practiced by rural households using family labour and, wherever feasible, locally available feed resources. It is a low-input production system that provides eggs and meat for household consumption while generating supplementary income. Family poultry farming has been widely recognized as an effective strategy for alleviating poverty, reducing hunger, and improving nutritional security in developing countries. By providing affordable sources of high-quality animal protein and enhancing livelihood opportunities, family poultry contributes significantly to food security, income generation, and the socio-economic empowerment of rural families, particularly women and marginalized communities (Panda *et al.*, 2020). Family poultry production occupies a unique position among livestock enterprises because of its affordability, adaptability, and quick returns. Poultry birds require relatively small space, reproduce

rapidly, and begin generating income within a short period. Even landless and resource-poor families can successfully rear poultry birds around their homesteads.

For many rural households, poultry serves as a "ATM," providing immediate cash during emergencies, festivals, school admissions, healthcare expenses, or crop failures.

Although the commercial poultry sector contributes 84.49% of the country's total egg production, the backyard sector's share of 15.51%, equivalent to 23.13 billion eggs, remains highly significant. This production is achieved largely by smallholder and resource-poor households, many of which are managed by women. Despite limited access to quality feed, veterinary services, improved technologies, and organized marketing channels, backyard poultry continues to make a substantial contribution to national egg production while supporting household nutrition, income generation, and rural livelihoods.

Why Family Poultry Production is Ideal for Women

Among various agricultural enterprises, poultry farming is particularly suitable for women due to several reasons:

- ❖ **Low Capital Requirement:** Family poultry production requires minimal initial investment compared to dairy farming or commercial livestock enterprises. Women can start with a small flock of birds and gradually expand their enterprise.
- ❖ **Easy Management:** Activities such as feeding, watering, cleaning shelters, collecting eggs, and monitoring bird health can be conveniently integrated into daily household routines.
- ❖ **Limited Land Requirement:** Unlike crop cultivation or large animal husbandry,

poultry birds require only a small area for housing and scavenging.

- ❖ **Quick Returns:** Egg production begins within five to six months of age in most breeds, while meat birds can be marketed within a few months, providing regular cash flow.
- ❖ **Ownership and Control:** In many rural communities, poultry birds are traditionally owned and managed by women. This enables them to retain greater control over income generated from the enterprise.

Nutritional Benefits of Family Poultry

Malnutrition remains a major challenge in rural areas, particularly among women and children. Poultry products offer a practical solution to this problem. Eggs are considered one of the most complete and affordable sources of nutrition. They contain: high-quality protein, essential amino acids, vitamins A, D, E, and B-complex, Fe, Zn, Se and healthy fats. Similarly, poultry meat provides highly digestible protein and important micronutrients required for growth and development (Panda *et al.*, 2011). Regular consumption of eggs and poultry meat helps to reduce protein-energy malnutrition, improve child growth and cognitive development, enhance maternal health, strengthen immunity and combat micronutrient deficiencies. Thus, family poultry contributes directly to household nutritional security while generating income.

Economic Empowerment of Women

One of the most significant outcomes of family poultry production is women's economic empowerment. Income generated from the sale of eggs, chicks, and live birds provides women with financial resources under their direct control. This additional income can be used for children's education, household expenditures, healthcare, savings

and investments and purchase of productive assets. Research and field experiences have shown that women who earn income from poultry farming often gain greater participation in household decision-making processes (Panda *et al.* 2022). Economic independence enhances their confidence and bargaining power within the family and community. Furthermore, poultry farming creates opportunities for women to develop entrepreneurial skills related to production, processing, value addition, and marketing.

Improved Poultry Technologies for Higher Productivity

Traditional backyard poultry systems often suffer from low productivity due to poor nutrition, disease outbreaks, and improper housing. The adoption of improved technologies can significantly increase production and profitability.

- ❖ **Improved Breeds:** Several improved poultry varieties have been developed for rural conditions. These birds exhibit: higher egg production, faster growth rates, better disease resistance and adaptability to scavenging systems. Examples include dual-purpose birds like Vanaraja, Giriraja are capable of producing both eggs and meat efficiently.
- ❖ **Balanced Feeding:** Proper nutrition is essential for optimum productivity. Women can improve bird performance by providing: Grains and cereals, Oilseed cakes, Azolla, Kitchen waste, Mineral mixtures, Clean drinking water etc. Balanced feeding enhances growth, egg production, and disease resistance.
- ❖ **Proper Housing:** Simple and low-cost poultry shelters protect birds from predators, adverse weather conditions, and disease transmission. A good poultry house should provide: Adequate ventilation, Dry

flooring, Protection from rain and cold,
Proper sanitation Sufficient space

- ❖ **Vaccination and Health Care:** Disease outbreaks are among the major causes of poultry mortality. Timely vaccination against common diseases such as Newcastle disease can dramatically reduce losses.

Training and Capacity Building

Training and extension support are crucial for transforming family poultry production from a subsistence activity into a sustainable and profitable enterprise. Capacity-building programmes equip rural women with essential knowledge and skills related to scientific poultry management, including selection of suitable breeds, balanced feeding, low-cost housing, brooding and chick management, disease prevention, vaccination schedules, sanitation, record keeping, and marketing strategies. Such training enables women to adopt improved technologies, reduce bird mortality, enhance productivity, and increase profitability.

Beyond technical knowledge, training programmes also strengthen women's confidence, leadership abilities, and decision-making skills, enabling them to participate more effectively in household and community affairs. Exposure visits, demonstrations, farmer field schools, and hands-on practical training further encourage the adoption of best management practices. Regular extension support helps farmers address emerging challenges, access veterinary services, and stay informed about new technologies and market opportunities.

Self-help groups (SHGs), cooperatives, producer organizations, and community-based institutions can serve as effective platforms for knowledge dissemination, collective input procurement, credit access, and marketing of poultry products. These institutions facilitate

peer learning, reduce transaction costs, and enhance bargaining power. Therefore, strengthening training and extension systems is essential for improving poultry productivity, increasing household income, and empowering rural women through sustainable poultry-based livelihoods.

Strategies for Promoting Women-Centered Poultry Development

To maximize the benefits of family poultry production, the following interventions are essential:

- ❖ Provision of improved poultry breeds suitable for local conditions.
- ❖ Strengthening veterinary and extension services.
- ❖ Organizing regular training programmes for women.
- ❖ Facilitating access to credit and insurance.
- ❖ Promoting women-led producer groups and cooperatives.
- ❖ Establishing input supply and marketing networks.
- ❖ Encouraging value addition and small-scale poultry processing.
- ❖ Integrating poultry development with nutrition and livelihood programmes.
- ❖ Enhancing digital access to technical and market information.
- ❖ Supporting gender-responsive policies and institutional mechanisms.

CONCLUSIONS

Family poultry production is much more than a small-scale livestock activity; it is a powerful instrument for improving livelihoods, enhancing nutrition, and empowering rural

women. By requiring modest investment and generating regular returns, poultry farming offers women an accessible pathway toward economic independence and self-reliance. The adoption of improved technologies, combined with training, access to services, and institutional support, can significantly enhance productivity and profitability. Investing in women poultry farmers not only benefits individual households but also contributes to food security, poverty reduction, and sustainable agricultural development. Empowered women, supported by knowledge and resources, can transform family poultry production into a thriving enterprise that drives social and economic progress in rural communities.

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