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Chickens and women's empowerment: why the New York Times is wrong

By Juan Pablo Villanueva-Cabezas
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[‘The myth of women’s empowerment’](#) – a New York Times op-ed – challenges the existence of any positive effects derived from donor initiatives seeking to empower women in developing countries. The author argues that these initiatives reduce non-Western women to “mute, passive subjects awaiting rescue” and seems to assume that donor organisations see the lack of women’s empowerment as a symptom of a lack of economic opportunities depicting, for instance, initiatives involving chickens as entrepreneurship starter kits.

However, many of the projects involving chickens are not aimed at transforming women into entrepreneurs. Many of the non-Western women benefited by these programs never aspire to become full-time farmers. These women raise chickens to alleviate food insecurity, as a mean of social engagement in their communities, or to access fast cash when unexpected costs appear. Raising chickens is not the mere act of entrepreneurship, but of empowerment in specific social contexts.

Defining women’s empowerment based on chicken production is challenging and requires an appropriate understanding of the specific settings evaluated. The recently published [Women’s Empowerment in Livestock Index \(WELI\)](#), the result of a collaborative effort between researchers of the International Livestock Research Institute and Emory University, is inspired by and builds on the [Women’s Empowerment in Agriculture Index \(WEAI\)](#), developed by the International Food and Policy Research Institute in 2012. WELI’s development seeks to overcome the limitations of WEAI in assessing women’s empowerment in areas where livestock is the dominant practice for livelihood.

WELI was developed and piloted with dairy smallholders in northern Tanzania assessing women’s empowerment by quantitatively exploring six domains (detailed below). The [pilot’s findings](#) suggest that the tool is appropriate for the assessment of households where livestock is the primary agricultural activity, and is especially useful for measuring women’s empowerment over time.

Although WELI still needs further validation, it is useful to explore how local chicken production led by women in developing regions stacks up against WELI's six empowerment domains.

1. **Decisions about agricultural production:** an [extensive review](#) of small-scale poultry and food security in resource-poor settings found substantial evidence that women are responsible for decision-making in regards to household chicken production, even if the household is male-headed. Anecdotally, [Dr Robyn Alders](#), who has worked extensively on village chicken production, has observed that increasing chicken flocks and sales of hens and roosters allow women to buy goats of their own – diversifying their livestock (and diets), and demonstrates changes in access and control of assets typically associated with men in rural settings.
2. **Decisions related to nutrition:** the team behind WELI found that women's decisions relating to nutrition in the household are a reliable indicator of women's empowerment. Proper control of poultry diseases, along with upskilling women in poultry farming, may translate into the permanent availability of chickens and eggs, contributing to more nutritious, high quality meals. Moreover, even if women sell the chickens and eggs they produce, part of the revenue is usually invested in increasing the quantity and variety of food available in their households – once again enabling families to access better quality diets.
3. **Access to control over resources:** women's access to resources, particularly land and credit, is limited in rural settings, severely undermining their access to large livestock and other agricultural activities. Women can easily access the low-input nature of extensive and semi-intensive systems of village chicken production which is of vital importance because women, along with children and elders, are usually at higher risk of [food insecurity](#). Chickens, therefore, represent an effective turn-around that overcomes, in part, the inequitable access of women to loans and property compared to men.
4. **Control and use of income:** when women have complete control of their income, they [invest up to 90%](#) in their households or communities. Men, in contrast, spend less than 50% of their income in these ways. Providing women with chickens, husbandry and health training may empower them to profit from the activity, investing not only in food diversity, but also in greater access to health, hygiene and access to education for children, which are vital to breaking vicious circles of poverty and under-development.
5. **Access to and control of opportunities:** although most women engaged in

village chicken production do so to secure household nutrition, these birds may become a profitable business opportunity for them. Local chickens are [usually preferred](#) by local consumers as these are considered 'natural' products of better quality in comparison to commercial breeds of poultry. The high demand for village chickens translates to high market prices and the willingness of traders to travel long distances to collect and sell these birds. The cultural value of village chickens allows for their quick commercialisation, which eases the engagement of women in this business practice. Compared to men, women livestock keepers have less access to information and inputs, including feed or vaccines. Since infectious diseases pose significant threats to village chicken production, interventions to prevent them are essential. In this line, [Kyeema Foundation](#), an NGO that promotes village poultry production for improved livelihoods, has performed extensive work in making a [thermotolerant vaccine](#) against Newcastle disease (a devastating disease of village chickens in most of the developing world) available and accessible. Kyeema Foundation has also trained many [women vaccinators](#) in different countries, thus promoting gender equity in rural settings and broadening the opportunities of development associated with chickens.

6. **Workload and control over time:** quite remarkably, village chickens place little demand on women's time as these birds excel in scavenging for their food, escaping predators, and sustaining a natural turnover of the flock, as hens can get broody in conditions where commercial breeds of chickens would not. The autonomy of these chicken systems allows women to have adequate time for other relevant context-specific responsibilities they might have.

In conclusion, the provision of chickens along with training in farming and health makes a marked contribution towards meeting the empowerment domains proposed by WELI. Chickens, rather than "rescuing mute, passive non-Western women," are an asset that give women an opportunity to direct their own journeys for empowerment.

About the author/s

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Juan Pablo is a PhD Student at The University of Melbourne's School of Population and Global Health. Bachelor of Veterinary Medicine and Diploma of Applied Epidemiology from the Universidad de Chile and a Master in Epidemiology from the University of Melbourne. Juan Pablo has special interest in the links between rural and urban small-scale livestock production and public health and is a guest blogger for the [Kyeema](#) Foundation.

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