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Gender and MSMEs in the food environment in Viet Nam

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Despite the introduction of supermarkets, Vietnam's food retail market is still dominated by wet markets, informal street markets and mobile vendors (Hai Tran & Sirieix, 2020). These are less expensive than supermarkets and offer various other advantages, such as the opportunity to purchase food on informal credit from the vendor, discounts in the evening, and additional services such as cutting vegetables and delivery (Kawarazuka, Béné, & Prain, 2018). As a result, supermarkets and convenience stores are of limited importance for food consumption of low-income households in Hanoi (Wertheim-Heck & Raneri, 2020). Yet even many wealthier people still do at least part of their food shopping at small traditional sellers (Hai Tran & Sirieix, 2020). Many informal vendors are migrants from rural areas, who often lack the formal education and social capital to gain formal employment (Jensen, Peppard, & Thang, 2013; Truong, 2018; Turner, Zuberec, & Pham, 2021).

Previous research has shown stark differences between male and female retailers in informal food markets in Vietnam. In the informal system, women tend to operate based on social relations rather than economic interactions, contrasting men's activities that tend to be more capital-based and similar to the formal system (Kawarazuka, Béné, & Prain, 2018). However, no recent quantitative information is available on the representation of men and women in the various types of food outlets in Vietnam.

Data

The data used for this analysis is part of a survey of MSMEs conducted by the CGIAR Sustainable Healthy Diets Initiative in northern Vietnam in April-May 2023. The districts are Moc Chau, a rural district in the Son La province; Dong Anh, a peri-urban district in the Hanoi province; and Dong Da, an urban district also in the Hanoi province. The total survey covered 1,627 businesses, which were sampled from a census of 6194 outlets across 15 types of outlets. For our sample of MSMEs, we only sampled from the types of outlets from which consumers purchase most of their foods, excluding larger or chain enterprises, and enterprises not likely to sell any healthy food: 1. Convenience store; 2. Non-convenience food store (e.g, fruit store, butcher store, etc); 3. Food stall/stand/tabletop inside toad market; 4. Food, beverage stall/stand/tabletop outside toad market; 5. Mobile vendor; 6. Non-fast food restaurant; 7. Coffee/fresh juice shop; 8. Bubble tea store. We excluded supermarkets, franchises and restaurants over 50 seats, as these are not likely to be MSMEs. In addition, we split restaurants into three strata by size. We sampled from all (randomly ordered) outlets until hitting the target sample size for each stratum. More information about the sampling can be found in Ceballos et al. (2023).

The analysis in this note is based on the subsample of 1,545 businesses for which the gender of the owner is known (95% of the total sample). Gender of owner was unknown when the business was state-owned (1), owned by a company (2) or if someone else than the owner was interviewed and the business had a single owner only (79 cases).

Results

Women dominate the sector in general. 72% of all workers are women: 79 percent of full-time workers and 40 percent of part time workers. Only 7 percent of businesses is owned by men, whereas 61% is owned by women. The remaining 32% has mixed-gender ownership, mostly one woman and one man (94% of cases). These averages also roughly describe the situation in the subsamples for the districts of Dong Ahn and Dong Da. However, in the rural district Moc Chau, female ownership was only 46%, with mixed-gender ownership being almost equally frequent.

Type, scale and organization of outlet

The dominance of female-only ownership is especially large in "non-permanent" outlets: more than two thirds of mobile outlets and food/beverage stalls (inside or outside toad markets) are owned by women (Table 1). Half or less of stores and restaurants is owned by women only, with most other establishments under mixed-gender ownership. Men are relatively well-represented as owners of coffee/fresh juice shops and bubble tea stores, but still own only 17 percent of these establishments.

Table 1: Gendered ownership by type of outlet

Type of Outlet	Number of Outlets	Percentage Owned By:		
		Men	Women	Mixed Gender
Convenience store (not part of a chain)	303	7	44	50
Food stall/stand/tabletop inside toad market	75	3	71	26
Food, beverage stall/stand/tabletop	644	5	68	28
Mobile vendor	1089	13	75	13
Non-fast food restaurant	223	9	39	53
Coffee/fresh juice shop	35	17	48	35
Dairy shop	16	17	50	33
Bubble tea store	664	9	51	40
Non-convenience food store	427	7	44	50
TOTAL	1,545	7	61	32

Note: Pearson chi2(14) = 132.2696 Pr = 0.000

Source: Viet Nam surveys.

In terms of scale, businesses with mixed-gender ownership were largest, as could be expected, with male- and female-owned businesses comparable in some but not all indicators (Table 2). The median mixed-gender business had two full time employees, compared to one for the median male and female owned businesses. On average, male-owned businesses had more employees than female-owned businesses, and only 11% of female-owned outlets had more than one full time employee, compared to 21% for male-owned outlets (and 73% of mixed-gender outlets). The median mixed-gender business generated a total of VND1.46 million in revenues per day, which is marginally less than two times the revenues of the median female-owned business, indicating comparable per capita incomes. Per owner income was highest for the median male-owned business, which generated VND1.00 million per day. Average total revenues are highest for mixed-gender businesses and comparable for male- and female-owned businesses. The spread in revenues is much larger for the female-owned businesses, with several very high reported incomes, which explains the lower median incomes for female-owned businesses.

Table 2: Scale of business by gender of owner

	Number of Obs.	Median	Mean	Standard Deviation	Min	Max
Number of full time employees						
Male owned	108	1	1.44	1.24	0	9
Female owned	935	1	1.16	0.60	0	8
Mixed gender	502	2	1.95	1.06	0	12
Number of part time employees						
Male owned	108	0	0.69	1.33	0	7
Female owned	935	0	0.44	0.98	0	14
Mixed gender	502	0	0.72	1.27	0	11
Daily revenues (1,000 VND)						
Male owned	95	1,000	2,269	3,912	0	25,625
Female owned	823	800	2,408	12,591	0	300,000
Mixed gender	425	1,458	3,790	9,637	0	120,000

Notes: Daily revenues not recorded for all businesses.

Source: MSME Survey.

The level of informality, as reflected by the share of businesses with a tax registration number, was lowest for female-owned businesses (Table 3). This is mainly the result of the differences in outlet type composition: women are especially highly represented in non-permanent outlets, which are rarely registered. They are also less likely to keep financial records and written budgets.

Table 3: Organization and book keeping by gender of owner

Percent of Businesses…	Male	Female	Mixed	All	Pearson Chi2
with tax registration number	17.6	11.3	21.1	15	32.5***
keeping financial records	12	5.5	13.1	8.4	28.9***
recording every purchase and sale made	18.5	7.5	15.5	10.9	30.7***
having worked out cost of each main item	81.5	70.2	69.5	70.7	8.7*
knowing which food makes the most profit/item	73.1	62.5	62.9	63.4	6.9
with written budget	20.4	7.9	14.1	10.8	26.1***
checking profits at least monthly	38.9	27.2	35.1	30.6	13.4***
letting customers buy on credit	56.5	63.1	63.3	62.7	3.4
if selling on credit: keeping written record	48.4	44.7	64.6	51.4	37.2***
Number of Obs.	108	935	502	1,545	

Notes: *- indicates statistical significance at the 10 percent level; **- indicates statistical significance at the 5 percent level; ***- indicates statistical significance at the 1 percent level.

We found only weak, if any, evidence for the observation of Kawarazuka et al. (2018) that female food vendors rely more on social relations, whereas men's activities are more similar to the formal system. The share of businesses letting customers buy on credit did not depend on the gender of the owner and women are not more likely to keep written records of such purchases than men (Table 3). Looking at the source of their products, female-owned businesses are more likely to sell own produce than male or mixed-gender owned businesses, whereas male-owned businesses are more likely to sell from distributors (Table 4). Own produce was an important source mainly for food stalls (inside and outside markets) and mobile vendors. Women were especially likely to own food stalls (64%), whereas men were more equally distributed over the different business types. Sourcing from own production was especially important in Dong Anh (60%) and Moc Chau (40%), which were closer to production areas. As Moc Chau has relatively less female ownership than the other two areas, these spatial differences cannot explain the gender effects observed.

Table 4: Key sources for the three main products, by gender of owner

Percent of Businesses…	Male	Female	Mixed	All	Pearson Chi2
Own production	9.8	20.8	14.2	18.0	13.6***
Producer	29.3	26.8	28.7	27.6	0.66
Collector from producers	15.2	10.5	12.3	11.4	2.44
Distributor (company)	21.7	11.6	16.5	13.9	11.34***
Wholesale/retailer	55.4	52.1	58.4	54.4	4.94*
Go to market themselves	20.7	22.0	17.4	20.4	4.2
Number of Obs.	92	894	478	1464	

Notes: *- indicates statistical significance at the 10 percent level; **- indicates statistical significance at the 5 percent level; ***- indicates statistical significance at the 1 percent level.

Food vending

Female-owned businesses were most likely to sell food ingredients and single foods, whereas mixed gender businesses were most likely to sell prepared food (Table 5). Male-owned businesses are most likely to sell snacks or drinks, which reflects their relatively high ownership of coffee/fresh fruit shops and bubble tea stores.

Table 5: Food Vending, by gender of owner

Percent of Businesses…	Male	Female	Mixed	All	Pearson Chi2
% selling unprepared/uncooked ingredients or single foods	62.0	71.3	63.1	68.0	11.99***
% selling prepared/cooked food	24.1	25.6	34.3	28.3	12.21***
% selling meals					
No meals served	43.5	60.1	49.0	55.3	22.86***
Breakfast	9.3	14.2	16.3	14.6	3.79
Brunch	9.3	8.9	13.5	10.4	7.80**
Lunch	14.8	8.9	15.5	11.5	15.58***
Dinner	11.1	5.3	11.2	7.6	17.60***
Snacks/Drinks	45.4	25.7	32.9	29.4	22.46***
Number of Obs.	108	935	502	1,545	

Notes: *- indicates statistical significance at the 10 percent level; **- indicates statistical significance at the 5 percent level; ***- indicates statistical significance at the 1 percent level.

The share of food vendors selling a specific food group ranges from 14% for poultry meat to 45% for vegetables, with shares varying significantly with the gender of the owner(s) (Table 6). Men are more likely to sell fruits, women are more likely to sell vegetables and roots and tubers, and men and mixed gender businesses are more likely to sell animal source foods and oils and fats. This is in accordance with the observation of Kawarazuka, Béné, & Prain (2018) that men dominate the value chain of meat and that even when meat sellers are female, the connection with men is important for a stable supply. Relatedly, fruits need more investment and bargaining power with wholesalers, which could explain the dominance of men. However, though statistically significant, the differences are not very large.

Table 6: Food Groups Sold, by gender of owner

% vending (of food vendors)	Male	Female	Mixed	All	Pearson Chi2
Roots and Tubers	20.7	28.3	16.5	24.0	24.28***
Fruits	47.8	38.0	33.9	37.3	6.94**
Vegetables	39.1	48.1	39.1	44.6	11.35***
Legumes	13.0	21.1	25.1	21.9	7.38**
Nuts and Seeds	31.5	26.7	29.5	27.9	1.81
Oils and fats	41.3	29.3	45.2	35.2	36.00***
Fish or shellfish	16.3	12.3	19.7	15.0	13.40***
Poultry meat	17.4	11.0	18.6	13.9	16.31***
Red meat	27.2	26.6	38.3	30.5	20.50***
Eggs	35.9	29.5	40.2	33.4	16.11***
Dairy (not including ice cream)	31.5	20.0	31.6	24.5	25.12***
Number of Obs.	92	894	478	1464	

Notes: *- indicates statistical significance at the 10 percent level; **- indicates statistical significance at the 5 percent level; ***- indicates statistical significance at the 1 percent level.

Female-owned businesses are less likely to possess any form of cold storage, and if they possess one, it is less likely to be a refrigerator/freezer or refrigerated shelving (Table 7). Again, this is due to the types of businesses they are engaged in: this result is not confirmed when looking at mobile vendors only, the dominant type. Women are less likely to use their cold storage for sweets/ice cream or beverages.

Table 7: Food Groups Sold, by gender of owner

% vending (of food vendors)	Male	Female	Mixed	All	Pearson Chi2
% any type of cold storage	63.9	51.4	69.7	58.3	46.38***
% of those with cold storage that have					
A cold room	1.4	1.5	2.9	2.0	2.15
A refrigerator/freezer	91.3	87.9	92.9	90.1	5.61*
Refrigerated shelving	31.9	15.6	20.9	18.9	11.90***
A cooler with ice	10.1	15.0	10.3	12.8	4.45
% of those with cold storage using it for					
Dairy	21.7	16.8	21.7	19.1	3.45
Wweets/Ice cream	18.8	14.3	25.1	18.9	15.41***
Beverages	42.0	33.1	50.3	40.4	25.05***
Fruits	24.6	19.1	18.6	19.3	1.39
Vegetables	27.5	27.2	26.3	26.9	0.11
Fish/Shellfish	11.6	9.8	11.7	10.7	0.87
Poultry	10.1	9.4	12.3	10.6	1.86
Meat	30.4	29.3	30.9	30.0	0.24
Ready-to-Heat (Frozen) Foods	8.7	14.8	10.0	12.4	5.18*

Notes: *- indicates statistical significance at the 10 percent level; **- indicates statistical significance at the 5 percent level; ***- indicates statistical significance at the 1 percent level.

Concluding remarks

Women play a key role in MSMEs in the food environment. 72% of all people employed in this sector are women and women (co)own 93% of all businesses. In only one third of these cases, they co-own the business with a man, most likely their husband. These co-owned businesses are on average largest, whereas male- and female-only owned businesses are of similar size on average. However, the range of revenues is much larger for women, with both more low revenue businesses as some very high revenue businesses.

Women are more likely than men and couples to own non-permanent businesses—mobile outlets and food/beverage stalls. This is associated with lower tax registrations, less book keeping, and less cool storage facilities. They are less likely to sell animal source food and more likely to sell roots and tubers and vegetables, but not fruits. Those commodities might have shorter-value chains within their social networks such as being produced by themselves or their neighbors, which is reflected in a higher share of women selling own produce. Those results indicate that although women vendors contribute significantly to offer nutritious and healthy food to consumers, the scale of business is limited. The finding also shows that women vendors are not a homogenous group. Further research is required to understand the contribution and vulnerability of those who rely on low revenue businesses, as well as their willingness to upgrade their business by capacity development.

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