

The Suffering of Farmed Poultry

- *Egg-laying Chickens*

The poultry industry is divided into two main sectors: egg production and meat production. Laying hens are a strain bred specifically for high volume egg production. The egg laying hens' wild ancestors – the red jungle fowl who still live in parts of Asia – lay between 10 and 20 eggs a year during their 10-year lifetime. Modern farming's egg-laying hens have been manipulated through selective breeding techniques to produce up to 30 times more eggs. Each year the average yield per hen is a staggering 300 eggs.¹

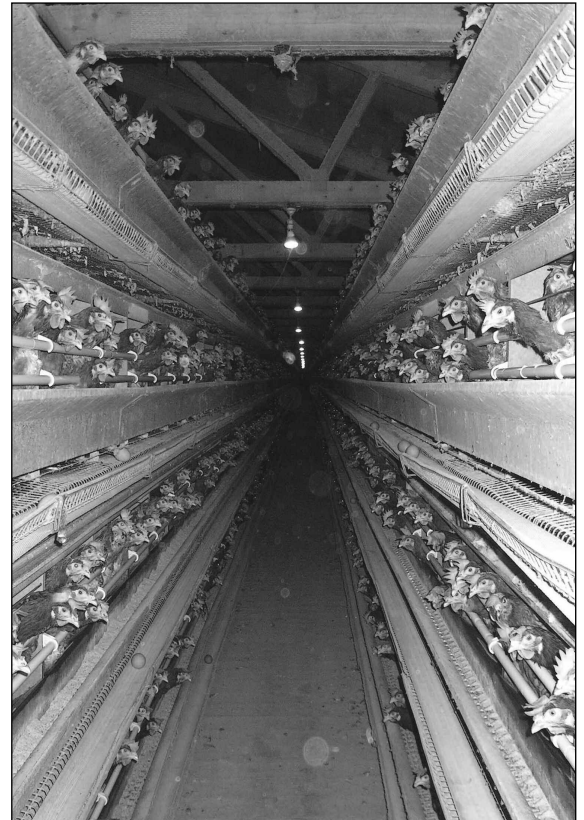
From hatchery to death

Hens start their lives inside industrial incubators in giant hatcheries. Newly hatched male chicks are considered useless because they cannot lay eggs and are too scrawny a type of chicken for meat. Consequently, 30 million of them are gassed or shredded alive in giant mincing machines every year. Their female counterparts begin their year-long ordeal of egg production at around 18 weeks.

Battery cages

Approximately 50 per cent of the total UK egg-laying population (30 million birds) are currently kept in battery cages.² Row upon row of cages are stacked in tiers inside huge windowless sheds that accommodate a laying flock of up to 50,000 hens.

A typical cage houses four or five birds, each allocated floor space equivalent to less than a standard A4 sheet of paper. They can barely move, let alone stretch their wings. Under natural conditions, hens instinctively display complex behavioural patterns involving dust bathing, foraging, perching and nesting. Close confinement in cages denies them the opportunity to perform any of these activities. Even feed and water supplies are automated, leaving egg laying as the birds' only activity. Deprivation causes chronic suffering and social conflict amongst cage mates, including bullying, feather-pecking and, in extreme cases, cannibalism.



'Enriched' cages

Battery cages are so inhumane that Europe's Agricultural ministers have agreed to end the rearing of egg-laying chickens in battery cages across the EU by 1st January 2012. However, some EU countries, including Bulgaria, Spain and Poland are a long way from complying and are trying to delay the ban.

The regulation states that by 2012 farmers must have phased out the use of battery cages in favour of free-range farming, barn aviaries or the use of so-called 'enriched' cages. The latter will have to allow at least 750 sq cm of space per chicken – twice the size of current cages, but a cage is still a cage and once the compulsory nesting area, scratching pad and perch are taken account of, the extra space the hens will have is equivalent to the size of a postcard.

Trauma of laying

Laying eggs is a natural physiological function for hens, although not on anything approaching the scale of the modern commercial bird. And without space or privacy, the mere act of laying in a battery house becomes an ordeal. Battery hens are denied the opportunity to perform pre-laying activity such as nest building. The resulting stress and frustration may result in stereotypical (meaningless, repetitive) behaviour.



Enriched cage



De-beaking

The egg industry attempts to prevent the stressed birds from harming one another by amputating the upper part of the beak in a routine mutilation known as de-beaking or beak-trimming. Up to half of the upper and sometimes also the lower part of the beak is sliced off using a red-hot blade when the hens are chicks. This causes chronic pain and further hampers any attempt at natural behaviour. This practice is prohibited only under organic standards.

Free-range and organic birds

The term 'free-range' suggests a handful of chickens scratching around a yard. But modern units usually contain thousands of selectively-bred birds packed together in sheds. Pop holes allow the inhabitants to exit and re-enter when the weather is suitable – providing they can struggle through the crowds of birds blocking the holes. But because of the special stresses associated with such intensive 'free-range' systems (the struggle for territory; the movement from the heated interior to the bug-laden outside world and back again; and the fact that they are the same highly in-bred strains as those raised in the most intensive systems), the birds typically suffer a premature mortality rate of four per cent.³ This compares with five per cent for standard intensive systems.⁴

The label 'organic' also implies higher welfare standards but it comes with no guarantee that the animals lived free-range. While organic and free-range animals are likely to have had a better quality of life than more intensively reared birds, they can still be housed in groups of up to 3,000 and, under organic standards, must be provided with outside access for only a third of their lives. Whether free-range, organic or factory farmed, the birds will be subjected to the same trauma of transport to the killing factory and the same terrifying, bloody death.

Sickness

Physical consequences of confinement include foot deformities – caused mainly by the absence of suitable perches – and severe bone weakness. This is prompted by restrictions on movement and, thus, normal skeletal development.

As a consequence, battery hens are prone to multiple fractures during capture and transportation to the killing plant. Bone weakness is exacerbated by calcium deficiencies, which can lead to osteoporosis.⁵ The creation of hundreds of egg shells requires a lot of calcium, and this is leached from the birds' bones.⁶ More than 45 per cent of laying hens break a bone at some point during their lives.⁷



Free-range unit

Slaughter

Chickens naturally live for up to 10 years but, at 72 weeks old, egg-laying hens are no longer able to produce the amount of eggs required and so can be worth as little as two pence. The worn-out bodies of these birds, known as 'spent hens', go into cheap meat products, such as soups, pies and pet food. Even their 'by-products' (including gizzards, entrails, hearts and other organs⁸) are turned into an 'emulsion', from which burgers and other processed foods can be made.⁹ Because their value is so low, few slaughterhouses will take these hens, and so millions are subjected to even longer than usual transportation times to killing factories.¹⁰

Poultry slaughter methods are highly mechanised and designed to maximise speed rather than to minimise suffering. Chickens are removed from their crates and suspended upside down by their legs on metal shackles. The most common method of slaughter is for a conveyor to take the birds' heads through an electrically charged water bath, with the current designed to stun and leave them insensible to pain when their throats are cut. They are killed by an automatic knife, which severs the main blood vessels in the neck. A slaughterer is also present to slit the throats manually of any birds missed by the machine. Once dead, the birds are immersed in a scalding tank to loosen their feathers before plucking.

There is considerable evidence that the slaughter process is inefficient. Inadequate stunning results in some birds going to the knife and even to the scalding tank alive.



References

- 1) Defra, 2009. Agriculture in the UK.
- 2) British Egg Information Service, 2011. Egg production. www.britegg.co.uk.
- 3) M. Samuel, Feb, 2008. 1,726,400,000 free-range birds? The Times, 29 Feb.
- 4) RSPCA, 2001. Behind closed doors.
- 5) M. Gentle, 2002. Comparative vertebrate nociception and pain. Roslin Institute, Scotland, 3 Dec.
- 6) T.G. Knowles and L.J. Wilkins, 1998. The problem of broken bones during the handling of laying hens – A review. Poultry Science, 77 p.1798-1802.
- 7) A. B. Webster, 2004. Welfare implications of avian osteoporosis. Poultry Science 83 p.184-192.
- 8) Dictionary of Food Science & Technology.
- 9) Kala, K. Rajani et al, 2007. Evaluation of quality of chicken emulsions stored refrigerated (4±1°C) for chicken patties. International Journal of Food Science & Technology, 42, No. 7, p.842-851.
- 10) Farm Animal Welfare Council, 2002. Proceedings of the Farm Animal Welfare Council's open meeting held on 27 June.