

WOMEN ENTREPRENEURS AND THE COMMERCIALIZATION OF TRADITIONAL VIETNAMESE FOODS

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ABSTRACT

Traditional foods play vital cultural and economic roles in rural Vietnam. Women have long been responsible for preparing, preserving, and passing down culinary traditions. Recently, many women have moved from preparing family recipes at home to selling them in the market. This review synthesises research on female entrepreneurs and the commercialisation of traditional Vietnamese foods, examining the opportunities, challenges, and social implications of this transformation. The findings indicate that women play a crucial role in preserving traditional foods. They innovate in processing and marketing while preserving their food heritage and culture. However, women face ongoing challenges, such as limited access to credit, food safety certification, marketing skills, and traditional gender roles, which make it difficult to grow their businesses. In contrast, government policy, the adoption of new technologies, and the rise of tourism and cultural heritage in the country are helping rural women gain more customers. Commercialising traditional food can be a double-edged sword, as it not only helps raise income and strengthen the community but also raises questions about how to maintain authenticity in these foods as they are transformed into commercial products. This review highlights research gaps, including the impact of digital platforms on rural women's businesses, the experiences of ethnic minority women, and the challenge of balancing heritage preservation with market adaptation. Filling these gaps is crucial for developing more effective policies and supporting women as key players in Vietnam's economic growth and cultural preservation.

1. Introduction

Traditional food products play a crucial role in shaping national identity, influencing consumer preferences, preserving cultural heritage for future generations, and bridging local traditions with global cultures (Albayrak & Gunes, 2010, p. 555).

Vietnam, located in Southeast Asia, boasts a rich cultural heritage. It is home to 54 ethnic groups in China. These groups are distributed across diverse regions, such as the northern mountains, central coastal areas, and southern plains (Vietnam Government Portal, n.d.). Each ethnic group and region has its own distinctive local specialties,

particularly in terms of cuisine. The flavours of traditional Vietnamese food have been preserved across generations. These foods are commonly used in the family meals. They have also been adapted for upscale restaurants that serve tourists.

Despite this diversity, only a limited number of traditional Vietnamese food products have been commercially successful in the global market. Many regional foods remain unfamiliar to both domestic and international consumers (Dân Trí, 2018).

Consequently, local traditional food products have declined, particularly as foreign cuisines such as Western, Korean, and Japanese foods have become

more popular in recent years.

Vietnamese consumers increasingly opt for foreign foods when dining out. Therefore, the commercialisation of traditional local foods is necessary to prevent further decline and promote these products to domestic and international audiences.

Women play a central role in preserving and transmitting traditional local food products. Most Vietnamese women are primary homemakers in their families. Consequently, they are the ones who remember the recipes and prepare traditional meals (Vietnam Women's University, n.d.). Consequently, their contribution to the commercialisation of traditional Vietnamese cuisine is significant. In recent years, women have been encouraged to participate in the local business ecosystem to generate income, promote gender equality within families, and reduce economic dependence. Numerous government and organizational programs support women's financial activity.

Although considerable research has been conducted on women entrepreneurs, there is a notable lack of research on female entrepreneurs in the traditional food industry. Hence, there is a need to know more about this field to better support these individuals, especially women, in rural or mountainous areas.

The study focuses on understanding how women participate in the commercialization of traditional food products, what enables or restricts their involvement, and developing ways to improve the commercialization of such products among women business operators.

2. Concepts

2.1 Traditional food:

The European Commission suggests that a food is considered "traditional" if people have been eating it steadily for at least one generation, usually taken to be approximately 25 years. This encompasses not only the dish itself, but also the ingredients and the way it is prepared.

However, from today's perspective, the picture becomes more layered. A food may be called traditional if, first, the main steps in making it still occur locally or within the region. Second, the recipe, raw materials, or the process itself seem to adhere to their original form. Third, it has been sold or made available to the public for approximately half a century. Finally, it is widely recognised as part

of the area's food culture or gastronomic heritage (Galanakis, 2019).

Fibri, Ayouaz, Utami, and Muhammad (2022) also state that traditional foods may be described as ethnic foods. Ethnicity can be understood as the social and psychological aspects associated with a culturally constructed group identity. In contrast, ethnic identity refers to an individual's perception of themselves as members of a larger cultural group. From this perspective, ethnic foods are closely tied to culture and may serve as symbols of group identity, expressing both cultural differences and shared heritage. Traditional food plays a significant role in a nation's intangible cultural heritage.

2.2 Commercialization:

Commercialisation is a key process in a country's economic development and a crucial step in innovation. Commercialisation can be understood in two ways. First, commercialisation is understood as the launch of new products or technologies. Second, commercialisation is understood as the process of transforming creative ideas into marketable products and gaining consumer acceptance through various intermediary activities, thereby creating a revenue stream for businesses and contributing to a country's economic development (Muñoz-Peñas, Clarke, & Evald, 2024).

However, commercialisation is a complex and potentially risky process. There is a risk of not understanding customer needs and, therefore, failing to meet those needs. Or the risk of not knowing the standards that need to be applied to the product, which can lead to product failure. (Muñoz-Peñas, Clarke, & Evald, 2024). Therefore, to minimise the risks of commercialisation, businesses must improve their skills and knowledge.

Technology, particularly digital marketing tools, has strongly influenced commercialisation in recent years. The growth of the Internet and social media has changed consumer behaviour and the way companies conduct business. Digital and social marketing offers organisations several clear benefits, including reduced costs, increased brand visibility, and higher sales (Dwivedi et al., 2021). In addition, customers are increasingly involved as co-creators, contributing to product and service development, value creation, and even the design of marketing strategies (Li, Larimo, & Leonidou, 2021).

2.3 Women entrepreneurship:

The number of women entrepreneurs has increased significantly in recent years, particularly in developing countries, as a sign of the narrowing gap between men and women. Women entrepreneurs play an important role in local economic development (Simba, Ogundana, Braune, & Dana, 2023). Research acknowledges that women's entrepreneurial activity plays a crucial role in promoting social stability and collective well-being while simultaneously creating economic opportunities for marginalised populations, including women, low-income individuals, and minority groups. These women entrepreneurs not only start businesses to generate income for themselves and their families but also create jobs for other women and people in their local areas. The participation of women in entrepreneurial activities helps create diversity in the local entrepreneurial ecosystem (Love, Nikolaev, & Dhakal, 2024). Thus, examining how women entrepreneurs finance their activities, especially in the developing world, becomes important for academic research, entrepreneurship, and policy maker.

Once among the world's poorest nations in the 1980s, Vietnam has transformed into a dynamic Asian economy, achieving notable social and economic development. The country has set a goal to reach upper-middle-income status by 2035 and build a society that is prosperous, innovative, fair, and democratic. As women comprise half of the population and their economic participation generates significant benefits, promoting women's entrepreneurship has become a government priority (Tran, 2021).

According to VCCI statistics, women currently lead approximately 22% of all businesses in Vietnam, a proportion similar to that found in developed nations such as Sweden (20%), Singapore (24%), and France (24%). In 2022, they accounted for a quarter of the entrepreneurs recognised by the VCCI for their achievements (Việt Nam News, 2023).

3. Methodology

Using a literature review approach, this study analyses the participation of female entrepreneurs in the commercialisation of traditional Vietnamese food products. By integrating various materials, this review builds a comprehensive understanding of the obstacles, facilitators, and limits of research on women's involvement in this area. The analysis incorporates materials in both English and

Vietnamese to strike a balance between global and local viewpoints.

Academic databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar were used alongside Vietnamese materials from the Vietnam Government Portal, Vietnam Women's Union, and national media archives. The literature search employed keywords and combinations such as *women entrepreneurship*, *women-led enterprises*, *traditional food*, *Vietnam*, *commercialisation*, and *cultural heritage*.

A total of 92 references were collected, of which 34 were selected for inclusion in the article as they provided information on Vietnamese traditional food or women entrepreneurs.

4. Context: Vietnam's Traditional Foods & Policy Landscape

4.1 Vietnam's Traditional Foods

Vietnam's unique geographical location offers a humid tropical climate, monsoons, and highly diverse natural conditions that vary across different regions of the country. With its long-standing agricultural civilisation and community-based traditions, Vietnam possesses a highly diverse and abundant system of local products, with each region having its own distinctive specialties, including food (Báo Văn Hóa, 2018).

In 2022, the preparation and performance of 63 dishes - typical specialties of 63 provinces and cities - and the creation of the first model of a Vietnamese culinary map was recognised as a record by the Central Committee of the Vietnam Record Holders Association and the Vietnam Record Organisation (Vietkings). The Centre for Research, Preservation, and Development of Vietnamese Cuisine, Saigon Professional Chefs Association, and Hoa Sen University also participated in this record (Tuổi Trẻ Online, 2022).

(continued)

Table 1. Classification of Vietnamese traditional food based on regions

Region	Representative Traditional Dishes
Northern Midlands & Mountainous Areas	Grilled Pa Pinh fish, Sour pho, Smoked buffalo meat (Meo Vac), Five-color sticky rice, H'Mong chicken grilled with "hat doi" seeds, Mugwort leaf cake, Duck stewed with chestnuts (Trung Khanh), Sour fermented pork (<i>thịt chua</i>), Bo Dau Chung cake, Dong Quan rice cake...
Red River Delta & Northeastern Coast	La Vong grilled fish, Hai Phong crab noodle soup (<i>bánh đa cua</i>), Hung Yen eel noodle soup, Lap Thach fermented fish (<i>cá thính</i>), Diem village sticky rice cake, Nam Dinh beef pho, Ha Long squid cake...
North Central Region	Thanh Hoa shrimp patties, Nghe An eel soup, Ha Tinh peanut-candy (<i>kẹo cu đơ</i>), Quang Binh thick rice porridge (<i>cháo canh</i>), Quang Tri chicken braised with shallots & sticky rice, Hue "Hell rice" (<i>cơm âm phủ</i>)...
South Central Coast	Khuê Trung boiled pork, Quế Sơn cassava pho, Song Tra river goby fish, Binh Dinh fermented pork rolls (<i>nem chua</i>), Song Cau grilled chicken, Nha Trang fish noodle soup, Ninh Thuan <i>banh can</i> , Binh Thuan "Lau Tha" hotpot...
Central Highlands	Dalat pork knuckle stewed with artichoke, Dak Nong fire-roasted chicken with bamboo rice, Kon Tum bamboo shoot sticky rice, Gia Lai dry pho (<i>phở khô</i>), Dak Lak catfish stewed with bamboo shoots...
Southeast Region	Binh Phuoc cashew-seed sticky rice cake, Binh Duong mangosteen salad, Dong Nai deep-fried sticky rice ball, Tay Ninh dew-dried rice paper with wild herbs, Ba Ria-Vung Tau "ca sung" fish with tamarind sauce, Saigon broken rice (<i>cơm tấm</i>)...
Mekong Delta (Southwest)	Ben Tre stir-fried shrimp with coconut & coconut-rice, Kien Giang herring salad, Mekong hotpot (<i>lẩu mắm</i>), Soc Trang <i>banh pia</i> ...

Although Vietnam has a wide variety of traditional foods, many remain unfamiliar to residents. However, only a limited number of these have been successfully commercialised and recognised both domestically and internationally.

For example, Phu Tho's sour meat. Brands such as Trường Foods and Con Cui have helped the product gain a 4-star OCOP rating, and the "Con Cui" line—built around sour meat—was even suggested by the province as a strong candidate for a national 5-star rating in 2024 (Báo Phú Thọ, 2023). In Quang Ninh, squid sausages have quietly built a reputation for themselves. The item now carries a 4-star OCOP certification (Báo Quảng Ninh, 2025). Thanh Hoa's nem chua is another story. It falls within the

province's OCOP food category, which already features more than 600 products—two at the 5-star level and 59 at the 4-star level. The province has been promoting online sales channels, which likely signals a step toward broader commercialisation (Báo Thanh Hóa, 2025).

Buon Ma Thuoc coffee from Dak Lak is not just a regional specialty—it carries a geographical indication recognized by the National Office of Intellectual Property. It is protected in 32 countries (IP, 2021). In Tay Ninh, the craft of making Trảng Bàng dew-dried rice paper has been recognised as a national intangible cultural heritage. The province organises festivals and trade fairs around it, which helps both tourism and sales, showing that

commercialisation does not always mean losing tradition (Báo ảnh Dân tộc và Miền núi, 2024). Finally, Phu Quoc fish sauce is a notable example. It secured a domestic geographical indication in 2001 and EU protection in 2012. Today, its large-scale production and export make it a model of how “standardization + branding + international markets” can come together successfully (Báo Nông nghiệp & Môi trường, 2025).

4.2 Policy landscape:

To promote the development of women-owned businesses, the Vietnamese government has issued several policies and programs to support female entrepreneurs. The most prominent ones are the One Commune One Product (OCOP) program and the Project to Support Women in Starting a Business for the 2017-2025 period (Project 939). These programs have had a significant impact and yielded incredibly positive results in supporting women in starting their own businesses.

“OCOP” was approved by the Vietnamese Government for implementation in 2018 through Decision No. 919/QĐ-TTg dated 7 May 2018 (OCOP, n.d). The purpose is to develop the rural economy, improve people’s lives, and promote regional benefits. OCOP products can be goods, handicrafts, regional specialties, processed agricultural products, tourism-related services, or other locally produced products. OCOP product classification: by stars (three, four, and five stars). Among the criteria for recognising OCOP products, there is a priority criterion for businesses owned by women. This creates favourable conditions for women’s businesses with products to be recognised as OCOP more easily (OCOP, n.d.). As of the latest date (2025), the country has 16,855 OCOP products with three or more stars. Of these, approximately 76.2% are 3-star products, 22.7% are 4-star, and 126 products have achieved 5 national stars. Approximately 40% of the participants were female, and 17.1 proportion were ethnic minorities. (Báo Điện tử Chính phủ, 2025).

The Project to Support Women in Starting a Business for the 2017-2025 period (Project 939) was approved by the Prime Minister by Decision No. 939/QĐ-TTg, dated 30 June, 2017. Its primary purpose is to support women in implementing start-up ideas, starting a business, raising awareness, and developing knowledge and related skills, as well as fostering women-owned enterprises, with a focus on prioritising women from disadvantaged backgrounds, ethnic minorities, and rural areas

(Vietnam Women’s Union, 2017). By the end of 2024, the Vietnam Women’s Union reported that the program had already helped create over 20,000 female-run businesses, and approximately 90,000 new enterprises led by women had undergone training sessions (Vietnam Women’s Union, 2024).

5. Truong Food Case Study

Several Vietnamese women have successfully started businesses based on traditional food products. A notable example is Nguyen Thi Thu Hoa, a Muong woman born in 1992 in Thanh Son District, Phu Tho Province, who founded Truong Foods and commercialised Phu Tho sour meat nationwide (Truong Foods, 2024).

Married at 18, she began to realise that many locals in the area produced sour meat in small shops, using inconsistent and fluctuating drying quality techniques. She started with just 4 million VND, producing 5–10 kg every day for neighbouring households. The results were conflicting, with some batches spoiled and discarded (Dân Trí, 2024). After two years, she attempted to refine the inconsistency using traditional ingredients, including wild boar meat, corn bran, bean bran, and local spices. She then solved the problem of preservation by purchasing seal film packaging and basic machinery, which provided a two-month shelf life and improved her productivity. In 2015, Hoa founded Truong Foods, established a factory, and began expanding into areas beyond Phu Tho. She established thousands of sales points, conducted marketing campaigns, and showcased her products on Shark Tank Vietnam, where they achieved a 4-star OCOP standard rating.

By 2022, the company's revenue reached 83 billion VND. In 2023, it employed over 100 local workers, mostly Muong people, and sold through 8,000 outlets, holding a 40–50% share of the local sour meat market (VTV, 2022).

6. Findings

6.1 Roles of women in commercialisation

In Vietnam, women hold an important place not only within family life but also in carrying forward cultural traditions, particularly through food preparation. Cuisine is more than daily nourishment; it often serves as a marker of identity, a way to strengthen community ties, and a bridge that keeps traditions alive across generations (Nguyen & Ta, 2025). The recipes, preservation techniques, and methods of preparation rooted in family and village

life form the backbone of many products that eventually enter the market. Consequently, women often possess the knowledge necessary to maintain the authenticity of these foods, which may be a deciding factor in whether consumers accept traditional food products (Galanakis, 2019).

When women turn traditional recipes into businesses, they are, in a sense, converting cultural heritage into an economic value. This shift may not only safeguard the cultural meaning of food but also bring new income and stability to the communities. In many ways, these women-led food enterprises become cultural ambassadors, carrying local identity to a broader audience through their products. Simultaneously, they can strengthen the local economy, provide jobs for their neighbours, and advance the goals of gender equality (Johnson et al., 2025).

Specifically, in the case of Truong Food Company, the company's success has helped popularise Phu Tho sour meat products among the general public nationwide, affirming the position of traditional Vietnamese cuisine. Additionally, the company offers employment opportunities to 100 ethnic minorities, thereby contributing to the economic development of the Phu Tho Province.

6.2 Enablers

The Vietnamese government has implemented various policies to encourage female entrepreneurship. The Vietnamese government recognises the important role of female entrepreneurs. As such, it has issued several support policies, including two notable and significant initiatives in recent years: the OCOP Program and Project 939. These policies have reduced barriers for women starting businesses by creating a more favourable environment, including improved access to capital, skills training, business knowledge, brand-building support, and product marketing assistance. These measures have enabled women to expand their food businesses from small-to large-scale. For example, the Truong Food Company received certification from the national OCOP program and benefited from its promotional activities.

The growing interest in tourism and cultural heritage appears to have become a genuine driving force for entrepreneurs involved in traditional food production. Today, few people travel only to see landscapes; they also seek experiences that allow them to engage with, taste, and feel the local culture

in various ways. Traditional foods often play a significant role in this process. It is not merely an add-on to the trip, but in many cases, one of the main reasons people travel in the first place (Ellis et al., 2018).

Food meets basic physical needs during a journey, but its impact often extends much deeper. A single dish may linger in memory, shaping how visitors recall a place long after returning home. Through meals, tourists can engage in a form of cultural exchange that feels immediate, authentic and accessible. This exchange helps them understand the identity of a destination more fully while enriching the emotional and even spiritual dimensions of travel. In this way, traditional food not only strengthens the value of tourism but also ties cultural heritage to the rhythm of everyday life (Ellis et al., 2018).

Technological advancements have become significant drivers of innovation and commercialisation in the food industry. New methods of processing, preserving, and even delivering food appear to create better opportunities for women to launch businesses centred on traditional products (Guerrero et al., 2009). In recent years, technologies such as high-pressure processing, pulsed electric fields, ohmic heating, microwaves and ultrasound have gained traction. These methods may preserve taste and aroma more effectively than older techniques, which is particularly useful for traditional food (Barba et al., 2021). A local example comes from Truong Food, where the CEO conducted her own trials and eventually discovered a way to preserve the company's speciality using sealed film packaging.

The rapid rise of digital marketing and online platforms, most notably Facebook and TikTok, has reshaped the way traditional food businesses operate. These social networks act not only as promotional tools but also as direct sales channels, making it easier for companies to reach and interact with their customers. This shift seems to be especially valuable for female entrepreneurs in the GCC. Many can now manage sales from their homes, which lowers the upfront costs of starting a business while opening access to much broader markets (Dwivedi et al., 2021).

6.3 Barriers

The World Bank (2023) notes that while women manage nearly half of all microenterprises, their

businesses often generate lower revenues than those run by men. Studies suggest that women-led firms typically invest less in crucial inputs such as entrepreneurial skills, hired labour, and capital. Part of the explanation may lie in the unequal division of household responsibilities among couples. In the Asia-Pacific region, women spend approximately four times more time on unpaid care work than men, leaving them with less time to devote to business management and other market-related activities. Access to finance is another barrier. Many banks still struggle to meet the needs of women entrepreneurs, and only approximately 21% of women-led enterprises report feeling adequately served by financial institutions (Carter, 2022).

Although the government has issued policies to support women in starting businesses, there are still no specific policies or activities in place to support women in the food sector, particularly those involved in traditional local foods. Many training programs for women entrepreneurs have been introduced; however, their impact has been limited as they often fail to address the specific needs and challenges that women in business face (Tran, 2021).

Incubators and co-working spaces, which provide support and incubation for startups, are primarily located in major urban areas of the country. Mountainous or rural areas still lack such locations. Therefore, ethnic minority women and women in mountainous or rural areas still do not have access to them. As in the case of the CEO of Truong Food Company, she had to figure out the formulas and production processes herself when transitioning from small-scale to large-scale production, lacking proper support from functional organisations.

Another barrier that food entrepreneurs face is the strict food regulatory system. Regulations related to food hygiene, safety, and packaging are highly rigorous and are carefully enforced. This is particularly evident in cases where food products are intended for export to international markets, as they must comply not only with domestic standards but also with the specific and often stricter requirements of the importing countries. These stringent measures are designed to protect consumer health, ensure product quality, and maintain trust in global trade systems. Women-led enterprises often struggle to access guidelines for these regulations, particularly in rural or mountainous areas.

One of the most significant challenges in introducing traditional foods to the marketplace is

striking a balance between large-scale production and authenticity. On the one hand, producers need to expand their output to meet growing demand; on the other, they must protect the distinctive taste, texture, and cultural meaning that make these foods “traditional” in the first place. If the original flavour is lost during the process, consumers may no longer perceive the product as genuine, which can quickly undermine trust and harm its market prospects. This constant tension between efficiency and authenticity often stands out as the main obstacle to transforming traditional foods into successful and widely distributed products (Shahrin & Hussin, 2023).

6.4 Strategy

Despite the existence of multiple enabling factors, several strategies are recommended to address the barriers encountered by women-led enterprises in the traditional food sector.

Training programs for female entrepreneurs should be tailored to address their unique circumstances rather than relying on a generic approach. Programs that focus on specific areas, such as food processing, marketing, or financial management, are more practical and effective.

Furthermore, capital support policies for women should be maintained and expanded, with simplified documentation and procedures to facilitate easier access to funds.

The establishment of incubators and co-working spaces by private individuals and businesses should be built to create a vast network and increase access opportunities for women in remote areas.

Women should be supported in accessing food product development research laboratories to enable them to conduct large-scale research on food processing formulas.

Women should have access to effective business networks to facilitate the commercialisation of traditional food products.

Women entrepreneurs in the traditional food sector need to connect with research institutes and universities to access the best support throughout the research, development, and commercialisation of their products.

7. Conclusion

Vietnam's food distribution system is diverse and extensive, and preserving these resources is essential for local economic development and protecting indigenous cultural values. Women play a critical role in maintaining, transmitting, and commercialising traditional foods; however, they face significant challenges in business development, particularly in the commercialisation of conventional food products. The Vietnamese government should enhance support for women in bringing traditional local food products to the market. Further research is needed to understand the challenges faced by female entrepreneurs, including the use of digital marketing in commercialisation, consumer acceptance of commercialised traditional products, and the commercialisation of ethnic-specific traditional foods among ethnic minority women.

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