



Build on the knowledge and initiatives of pastoralist women

Policy brief prepared by the IYRP Working Group on Pastoralism & Gender

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On rangelands covering over half the Earth's land surface, pastoralists are producing food and other products from livestock. About half of the pastoralists are women and girls. Not only have rangelands and pastoralists been largely ignored in development efforts; those efforts that do reach rangelands largely ignore the female half of the population and particularly the women's identity and expertise as pastoralists. This policy brief focuses on pastoralist women and their vital roles in contributing to dynamic pastoral systems and maintaining social cohesion. It urges policymakers and development professionals to recognise and support women pastoralists and their initiatives.

The United Nations General Assembly has designated 2026 as the International Year of Rangelands and Pastoralists (IYRP 2026) to enhance rangeland management and the lives of pastoralist communities. It also designated 2026 as the International Year of the Woman Farmer, explicitly including women who work with livestock. These International Years give a double opportunity to spotlight women pastoralists.

Pastoralists make productive use of rangelands under highly variable and uncertain climatic conditions and across a great diversity of landscapes – dryland savannas and steppes, mountainous regions, tundra etc. Over two billion people depend directly or indirectly on pastoralism and related value chains and foods (UNCCD 2024). Appreciating gender relations and associated power dynamics is a prerequisite for understanding these people's access to and control over resources, their ability to influence decisions, and the way in which they are affected by political and socio-economic processes in the rangelands.

Despite having been highlighted for decades in development cooperation, gender issues are still often overlooked in rangeland and pastoralist development interventions. In the lead-up to 2026, the IYRP Working Group on Pastoralism & Gender seeks to generate better understanding of gender issues related to rangelands and pastoralism, to advance gender equity with respect to access to resources and inclusion in decision-making related to pastoral management and governance issues, and to give greater visibility and voice to pastoralist women and girls at subnational, national, regional and global level.

Women in pastoral systems: tradition and change

In all pastoralist societies, women play crucial roles in livestock husbandry and rangeland management. Their knowledge, expertise and labour related to livestock, plants and water are essential to pastoralism, as is their work caring for homes and families and cultivating good social relationships within and between communities (e.g. Fernández-Giménez et al. 2024). Their roles in building social capital and ensuring the sharing of resources within the family and community help maintain social cohesion and to navigate potential crises for pastoralists' survival. Pastoralist women are also keepers of the cultural heritage of pastoralism, ensuring that this vital knowledge is shared in the community – particularly from women to women, daughters and granddaughters – and thus passed on to younger generations.

When the entire household moves with the herd, this would not be possible without women's expertise and speed in packing and setting up the new camp. Teams of young women take turns to travel to a well or tap to fetch water for their families and for young or sick animals kept at the camp. In some pastoralist societies, especially those that have partly settled, men and boys move the herds to more distant pastures, while older women and girls collect fodder to supplement the diet of animals grazing closer to the home. Pastoralist women process milk and meat from livestock into dairy products and other foods to nourish their families and to sell in markets, earning cash income and providing nutritious food for customers. In many countries, women and girls are often the main artisans in producing textiles from animal fibre.

Pastoralist societies throughout the world differ with respect to who can purchase, inherit or otherwise gain access to livestock; who decides about livestock management; who sells animals and their products; and who controls the income from the sales. Most pastoralist women do not have the same opportunity as men to gain access to production resources such as livestock, land, credit, technologies and services.

In many cultures, women had customary rights to access common land for gathering wild foods, fuel and building materials and sometimes for cultivation, but more recent processes of land privatisation – often driven by development projects – have eroded these rights. Even in countries where women and men are legally allowed to hold equal rights over land and livestock, including rights of inheritance and to share benefits, these formal rights may not be implemented or may take force very slowly. Access to credit and technical assistance remains even more of a barrier to women than to men.

In rangelands, changes in land use and commodification of land and natural resources drive socio-economic changes that exert growing pressure on pastoralist livelihoods. Development interventions – including the dominant approach in providing basic services – promote changes that are not always positive for mobile pastoralism. Providing education and health services through fixed facilities in towns induces families to settle, leading to unsustainable concentrations of livestock, higher prevalence of animal disease, lower animal productivity and rangeland degradation. This increases pastoralists' exposure to climatic risk. These changes have impoverished many families and led to shifts that, more often than not, penalise women.

In many regions, pastoralist women are now taking on even greater responsibilities to ensure the wellbeing of the family and livestock. This is especially the case in poorer families with fewer animals and in more remote areas. It is often the men and youth (male and female) who migrate to urban centres or other countries in search of work, leaving older women to care for the livestock and family members who remain in the rangelands. Although it means more work for them, taking on more responsibilities has also created opportunities for women, who have become more active in livestock, dairy and fibre markets to generate cash to meet household needs and to build their own capital, also in the form of livestock such as chickens and goats. They thus help keep their communities resilient (Stites 2024).

However, where development projects intervened, especially in the commercialisation of the sectors that were traditionally managed by women, such as processing of livestock products, this often resulted in shifting control to men, even when the projects initially focused on women and were intended to empower them. Men with more powerful connections and better access to capital are attracted to the sector as soon as substantial profits can be made. These gender shifts can diminish the role and realms of influence of pastoralist women in both family and community.

In decision-making processes above the family level, pastoralist women often have only indirect ways of influencing decisions through male members of the community, instead of participating in decision-making entities themselves. Development initiatives and community governance institutions are often designed in ways that constrain pastoralist women from taking active part in addition to their productive (e.g. livestock care) and reproductive (e.g. child-bearing and rearing, homemaking, care of the elderly) labour. These continuing obstructions to equity thus restrict women's potential contributions to development and governance, and limit the social and economic growth of families and communities.

Gender in rangeland scientific, academic and technical environment

The lack of recognition of pastoralist women may be partly due to the fact that, in the past, knowledge about pastoral systems was collected mainly by men who observed and interviewed male pastoralists. This refers especially to rangeland and animal sciences as taught in Europe, North America, South Africa and Australia. Still today, men dominate in these disciplines, as evident in the gender imbalance in publications, congresses, professional associations, and research and academic positions (for USA, see Ganguli & Launchbaugh 2013; Dahl 2022). Women scientists often reach only supporting positions and are denied real options for advancement. Moreover, they often earn less than men even when women do the same (or more) work. This demotivating situation leads many women to abandon these fields and seek better opportunities elsewhere.

Similarly, experts and professionals in rangeland and livestock advisory services, technical sectors, government and policymaking bodies dealing with rangelands and livestock are mostly men. Women are often relegated to auxiliary positions outside of decision-making related to research and development.

Although this situation is improving, e.g. in Mongolia, where women range scientists and professionals in public, private and non-profit sectors have greatly increased in number (M. Fernández-Giménez, unpubl. data), the legacy of the earlier situation remains. The history of the low status of women in these knowledge and management areas contributed to invisibility of the key role played by pastoralist women. The male bias in the public sector and academia was often projected onto pastoralist communities, where still today men are often addressed as main interlocutors.

Initiatives of pastoralist women in the face of change

Pastoralist women are not waiting for development interventions. The world over, they are taking own initiatives to deal with emerging problems and opportunities. Indeed, research in Eastern Africa has shown that pastoralist women are more willing than men to experiment with options for commercial enterprises and innovative diversification and are more likely to form cooperative groups to reduce risk and increase profits, even though they often have greater difficulties than men to access credit and assets (Stites 2024).

They have also become active in policy advocacy. In 2010, about 100 women from over 30 countries met in Mera village in Gujarat State, India, at the Global Gathering of Women Pastoralists. In the Mera Declaration they called for recognition of their professionalism as women pastoralists and of pastoral mobility as a basic right. They demanded better access to productive resources, markets, technologies, information and services and incorporation of their expertise in interventions aimed at sustainable rangeland management. The Pastoral Women's Alliance that emerged from this event now includes about 3000 women.

This is our right and it is by remaining pastoralists that we can be of greatest service to the entire human community (Mera Declaration 2010).

Pastoralist women have also taken initiatives to form national or subnational networks, such as the Pastoral Women's Council in Tanzania (PWC), the *Ganaderas en Red* (Women Pastoralists Network/GER) in Spain and the *Nők a pásztorságban* (Women in Pastoralism) in Hungary. The women in these networks meet in person and virtually, exchange knowledge and learn from each other, provide mutual support to overcome social isolation, empower each other to nurture pride in their identity and collaborate to develop sustainable solutions for their communities. They formulate demands to policymakers (see below) and use various media, including songs and film, to convey their messages.

Women herders' priority demands to Spanish policymakers (GER 2024)

- Facilitate access to grazing land by young people and rural women
- Incorporate pastoralism into primary and secondary school education and values
- Facilitate entrepreneurship such as in processing and direct marketing of livestock products
- Support measures to reconcile family and work in pastoralism
- Include extensive livestock farming in the list of at-risk professions with regard to maternity leave
- Include pastoralists and other livestock-keeping women in government-promoted spaces for dialogue and decision-making

Building on the knowledge and initiatives of women pastoralists

Many pastoralist women are also grasping opportunities offered by development interventions that recognise women's potential and expertise, so as to capture the socio-economic benefits and contribute to their societies while retaining their cultures and ways of life.

Successful development interventions are those that take pastoralist women's multiple socio-economic roles and responsibilities into account, while also building on their knowledge, expertise and initiatives. Below are four examples of such external support to women's initiatives related to pastoral dairying, animal healthcare, processing animal fibre and managing rangeland resources.

1. Enhancing women's role in pastoral dairying

In the traditional culture of many pastoralist societies, access to milk from the herd is part of a woman's identity, and milk handling and income are fully under her control. However, many development projects seeking to "modernise" milk processing and marketing have worked with men, robbing women of their power within the pastoralist society and economy by denying their traditional rights to milk and related income (Waters-Bayer 1986, Yurco 2024). Instead, interventions in dairy value chains should start by recognising women's role in dairying and their own initiatives to process and market context-appropriate (e.g. fermented) milk products that keep well, are easy to transport and can be afforded by poorer consumers. For example, in Isiolo County in northern Kenya, a few Somali women who were trading individually in camel milk formed the Anolei Women's Camel Dairy Cooperative for collecting, processing and distributing the milk. They expanded local sales of dairy products into larger and further-reaching operations, as far as Nairobi 270 km away. Biovision Foundation and Vétérinaires Sans Frontières Switzerland then supported the cooperative in infrastructure development and training in business skills. Egerton University

(Kenya), the Natural Resources Institute (UK) and the African Agriculture Knowledge Transfer Partnership (AAKTP) Programme helped the cooperative to reduce milk wastage and to improve feed composition and ways of adding value to the milk products, and also enhanced business analytical capacities through joint market research and consumer-awareness campaigns (Po *et al.* 2023).

2. Enhancing women's role in animal healthcare

Pastoralists are keenly interested in and traditionally knowledgeable about animal health and actively seek access to reliable healthcare, inputs and services, but external services are seldom adapted to the herders' remote and mobile life often far from towns or roads. Some governments and development organisations have begun to appreciate the importance of including women in animal health interventions. Pastoralist women, also illiterate ones, who receive adequate training and technical support can operate as community-based animal health workers (CAHWs). For example, in many states in India, NGOs such as Anthra, Goat Trust, BAIF Development Research Foundation and Aga Khan Rural Support Programme, as well as the Nimbkar Agricultural Research Institute and some State Departments of Livestock have trained women pastoralists and livestock keepers as paraprofessionals or "*pashusakhis*" (friends of animals) to provide primary animal healthcare services to the community. Many women in pastoralist societies regard animal, human and environmental health as deeply interconnected. Recognising this, the NGOs designed their CAHW training to build on the women's existing ethnoveterinary knowledge and broader local knowledge systems, incorporating maintenance of local animal breeds and local grazing management practices. The training adds important elements such as vaccinations, preparing and using validated herbal medicines, and linking to government services. Studies on these community-based systems have shown that they are an important link in managing animal, human and environmental health in the community (Ramdas *et al.* 2004).

3. Enhancing women's role in processing animal fibre

In many pastoralist societies, women are skilful artisans in transforming wool and other animal fibres into textiles for the family and household as well as for sale. With the spread of cheap imported, industrially manufactured clothes, the traditional skills are in danger of being lost, but some women's groups are reviving the local processing of animal fibre, focusing on products of high quality and cultural value. For example, when many families in Catamarca Province in Argentina faced an economic crisis in 2001, several women – mostly single mothers and family heads – in Belén decided to create their own source of livelihood by collaborating in spinning, dyeing and weaving wool, mainly from transhumant flocks. By 2008, they had organised themselves to the point that they could form the *Arañitas Hilanderas* (Little Spinning Spiders) Work Cooperative and acquire their own building. They received support from a national plan to increase employment for low-income people, funds from the national Ministry of Development to buy raw material and equipment, state grants for the cooperative members and supplementary social wages. The cooperative maintains the artisanal tradition of weaving textiles by integrating still more young women to continue this work. It also serves an important social function for the women and the community. It now consists of about 30 women, known nationally as a symbol of economic solidarity and resilience and as producers of some of the finest artisanal textiles in Argentina. Many tourists to Catamarca visit the factory to watch the weavers at work and to buy their products. The cooperative also sells to local people and customers who order from a distance (www.facebook.com/aranitashilanderasok).

4. Enhancing women's role in natural resource management and governance

Pastoralist women play an important role in using and stewarding pastoral natural resources and have traditionally but often invisibly influenced decision-making in this regard in Mongolia (Ulambayar & Fernández-Giménez 2013). The Mongolian NGO JASIL therefore encouraged women's participation in decision-making within the development interventions related to co-management of natural resources by herders, their communities and local governments under the state ownership of pasture land. It set up women's groups in all communities where it was working so that women's involvement in decision-making in co-management would be ensured and visible. It facilitated women's initiatives in protecting and restoring pasture and other natural resources according to their traditionally inherited knowledge and customs. This generated greater public recognition in both the herding communities and in government entities about what pastoralist women are actually doing in terms of natural resource management (NRM). Now, almost 90% of community members think that women are more actively involved in NRM than are men. Moreover, more than 20% of the leaders elected by the communities co-managing pastoral resources are women. Some of these women are registered in the global database of ICCA (Indigenous and Community Conserved Areas) and enjoy opportunities to share their experiences with other communities at local, national and regional level in Central and East Asia (Ykhanbai *et al.* 2006).

Call for action by policymakers

Facilitate development actors to gain a deeper understanding of gender issues in pastoralism, including how gender is perceived in different pastoralist societies: gender identity and roles and gender-related division of responsibilities for family, community and production. Base any development intervention on applied research into gender roles in pastoralist societies, how these roles are changing and how gender equity could be reached.

Acknowledge and reinforce women's roles in caregiving and peacebuilding in pastoralist families and communities. The women are aware and proud that they are indispensable in family and community life, because they are caregivers and experts in certain tasks, and they wish to be appreciated for this expertise. Pastoralist women's behaviour that is often seen by outsiders as being submissive needs to be recognised as signs of quiet strength, determination and power within their cultural setting. Policymakers' re-interpretation of women's behaviour is a first step toward shaping strategies that foster their more visible participation in processes of improving community wellbeing and peacebuilding.

Recognise and reinforce pastoralist women's rights to use land and other resources. This requires a different approach than in settled crop-farming systems. In pastoralism, the mobility of livestock and of at least part of the family is key for sustainable rangeland management. In many societies, women have customary rights to co-utilise the land and other natural resources, and play a crucial role in maintaining the multiple functions of land being used by different groups for different purposes at the same or different times of the year, e.g. for grazing, cropping, gathering wild fruits and leaves, hunting and cultural purposes.

Stop converting pastoral land to other uses in ways that exclude pastoralists, such as for mining, nature conservation projects, tourism, trophy hunting, crop production and renewable energy generation. This deprives pastoralists of their communal land on which their mobile grazing systems and livelihoods depend and especially impacts pastoralist women, who are often left behind when men migrate because the relocated families can no longer live from pastoralism. Also settled pastoralist women face restrictions in herding their animals to both close and distant pastures because cropland around the villages is being fenced. Herders' rights of way through and around the villages need to be ensured.

Focus on rights of pastoralist groups rather than women as individuals. Well-functioning pastoralist communities operate as collective units. Rather than focusing on giving women rights as individuals, which could weaken the group by promoting individualism and privatisation, focus on building women's capacity to access land and other resources through the group. This applies also to women's rights to assets that can generate socio-economic benefits such as water infrastructure and communication technology, their rights to engage in livestock-related enterprises and their rights to benefit from the income generated.

Address and eliminate gender-based violence and its drivers such as oppressive social norms and women's lack of confidence through education programmes for men, women, youth and children, to ensure that women know and can exercise their rights and take part effectively in decision making in the community and higher levels. Set up hotlines where both women and men can report incidents of gender-based violence and can request protection.

Enable the perspectives of pastoralist women to be heard in all fora, institutions and initiatives related to planning, management, governance and policy advocacy about rangelands and pastoralism. Where needed, support women-only and women-led groups to heighten the women's confidence and capacities, including young women and physically disabled ones, to speak out in mixed-gender public meetings. Strengthen the capacity of women leaders, e.g. through women's leadership training, and create opportunities for women to acquire leadership positions and fulfil them effectively. In many development projects, men represent their communities in the public sphere. Give attention to creating spaces for women to engage in externally initiated decision-making mechanisms about local development and governance of land and resources.

Prioritise support to pastoralist women's collaborative action and social movements and incorporate these movements into external initiatives related to rangelands and pastoralism, including the exchange and planning leading up to the IYRP at national, regional and global level. This could involve supporting a global gathering of pastoralist women to give them opportunity to exchange experiences, express their

views and concerns and promote their rights, as a follow-up to the 2010 Mera gathering, thus giving the women greater visibility and amplifying their voices at international level.

Integrate pastoralist women and girls into action research related to pastoralism and rangelands, by facilitating gender-sensitive dialogue between holders of local and scientific knowledge and jointly seeking solutions based on pastoralists' capacities to identify their own problems and devise appropriate ways to solve them. Start by recognising the specific knowledge held by women pastoralists, which underpins their contributions to maintaining healthy rangelands and sustainable pastoralist livelihoods, and their own innovations and initiatives to deal with emerging problems and opportunities, including how they are already dealing with climatic and other crises. Use tools such as community conversations to help in integrating women into the action research.

Recognise and encourage women scientists and experts as co-generators of knowledge about rangelands and pastoralism and as co-actors in related development planning and policymaking. Women professionals can strengthen gender-sensitive participatory research, innovation and learning in these fields. Provide safe, non-discriminatory, violence-free and gender-sensitive workplaces in the rangelands and pastoralism sector, and support for parenting and other forms of family care.

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