

# Women pastoralists' empowerment: Supporting positive change

## Summary

Interventions that attempt to support gender equity and pastoral women's empowerment need to be start with pastoral women themselves. Empowerment is more sustainable and facilitating when it comes from within. Women's place and role in the pastoral unit and community needs to be understood and acknowledged. What empowerment means for pastoral women should influence how this is supported and achieved. The right institutional framework and supporting mechanisms are vital to support women's empowerment.

## Introduction

How best to support women's empowerment and gender 'equity' has been a matter of debate for decades. And yet still, many development-focused programmes and projects fail to incorporate and address gender issues in an effective manner. As a result women continue to be marginalised by mainstream development processes that focus on men as heads of households. When access to resources and land are formalised, women often lose their rights of access, which they were often provided under customary systems. Women's income generation projects fail once development organisations cease their support. Violence against women continues and is a likely contributing factor to skewed population ratios in some areas, which highlight a significant level of 'missing women'<sup>1</sup>.

This is clearly seen in pastoral areas where 'development' is perhaps more challenging than in other parts due to such as inaccessibility and lack of infrastructure and markets; cycles of drought as well as less predictable climatic events

that demand emergency response often conflicting with longer-term sustainable growth models; and the inconsistent nature of investment in these areas and their communities by governments who fail to see their potential.

If pastoral women's empowerment is to be achieved, the process must start with pastoral women themselves: their knowledge and skills, their roles and responsibilities, their needs and priorities, and their own strategies for change. Only with a greater understanding of and investment in these, will more positive and sustainable change be achieved.

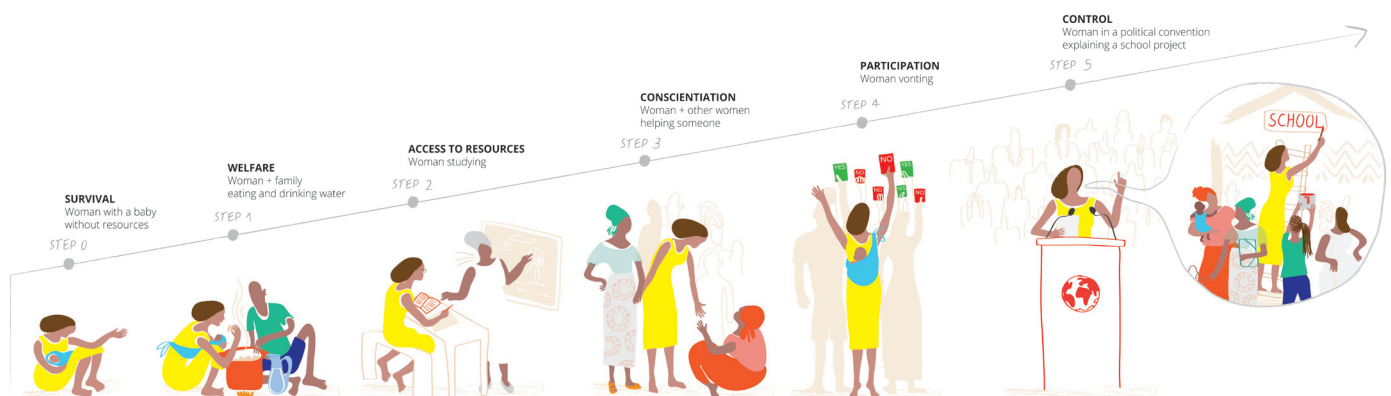
In order to contribute to this understanding IUCN-WISP commissioned a review of pastoral women's empowerment as a foundation for engaging with pastoral women and organisations trying to support women's empowerment.<sup>2</sup>

## What does 'empowerment' mean for pastoral women?

A basic level of empowerment for pastoral women means being able to feed oneself and one's family, and ensure their welfare. Pastoralists often live in harsh physical environments: achieving basic survival can be a daily challenge. It is highly dependent on women and men working together in complementary roles. In pastoral societies gender roles become internalised at a young age – boys and girls are socialised into performing their respective roles. These influence thinking and action and are carried through life, making it difficult to change them. As part of a pastoral unit or clan, women may be required to risk their own health for culturally embedded rites and norms (see Box 2).

### Box 1

Empowerment is the process by which the powerless or power-poor gain greater control over the circumstances of their lives. It includes both control over the resources (physical, human, intellectual, financial) and ideology (beliefs, values, attitudes). It means greater self-confidence, and an inner transformation of one's consciousness that enables one to overcome external barriers to accessing resources or changing traditional ideologies (Adapted from Sen and Batilwala, 2000. "Empowering women for reproductive rights" in H. Presser and G. Sen (eds) *Women's empowerment and demographic processes*. New York: Oxford University Press.



## Box 2 Circumcision – a rite of passage to empowerment?

Afar women in Ethiopia define empowerment by being '*hilaly* and *dieto*' explains Asmare Ayele, Team Leader for CARE Ethiopia. "These Afar words mean powerful and capable, respectively. Having *hilaly/dieto* qualities implies reaching the height of social status and acceptance for Afar women, but this position can be obtained only after marriage, a milestone that, by definition, requires circumcision."<sup>3</sup>

Women play a dominant role in ensuring basic needs of the household are met, and often have a large amount of control over such as food distribution within the household. Though within pastoral social systems the clan and other communal structures are of vital importance, there is also room for individual space and domains to be created. An adult woman may have her own tent, hut or home in which she exercises complete control over who enters, sleeps and eats there, controls all the property and possessions kept within, and nurtures and nourishes her children.<sup>4</sup>

## Box 3 Fulbe Women's Position in the Home

In the social organisation of the pastoral communities of the Jallube, Fulbe, women have a very central role as head of the *fayannde* or "hearthold". In fact it is the domain of a woman's family and her herd (*suudu*) in her husband's *wuro* (cattle camp). The hut and its contents symbolise the *fayannde* and are the property of the woman and is built by female members only of her *suudu yaaya*. The social role of women is centred on the control of milk (breast milk as well as cow's milk). The formation of a *fayannde* may be temporary, owing to the high rate of divorce, but that does not mean that established relations will vanish. On the contrary this flexibility of the *fayannde* may even be an advantage for women, because it enlarges their social networks and gives them freedom of choice. Land is, in this regard, of little importance to women. In fact if a woman works on the land it lowers her status to that of a slave.<sup>5</sup>

Empowerment also means having access to the resources, assets and services that they require for their wellbeing and development. It is also about having a role in the control of such access and related decision making processes. Women may have much greater access to livestock assets than is perceived by outsiders, with a central role in livestock production and a high degree of related knowledge and skills. Women can dominate the use and sale of some livestock products such as milk, and have strategies that they use to optimise milk production and marketing. Women's role in income generation is growing as diversification of livestock-based pastoral systems is increasingly becoming a necessity in some areas. As one Maasai woman from Tanzania put it:

***We can no longer depend on our husbands,  
we must support ourselves.***<sup>6</sup>

Social support relations, including those based on kinship and clan networks are key to pastoral society, including women. Women may form informal groups and relationships with other women to support each other and provide an important safety net in times of need. Women see the advantages of 'group power' for mutual support, solidarity, sharing skills and accessing resources such as credit or land. As a result women have come together in a number of ways including for co-management of natural resources (see Box 4), to initiate economic change through such as income generation activities, and to drive social and political change including fighting for their rights.



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## Box 4 Co-Management of Resources Improves Women's Empowerment

Mongolians have a long tradition of nature conservation. Women maintain this by teaching their children how to protect and soundly use nature, as well as taking part in activities. But housework hinders women's participation in NRM. Since the introduction of co-management of resources, women's roles and participation in NRM has increased. This has been facilitated through the establishment or formalisation of women's groups. The women have also got involved in income generation activities, learning from each other, various trainings, exchange of experiences with other communities, study tours and participatory monitoring and evaluation of the community's co-management efforts. In two communities, Tsagaannuur and Arjargalant, women played a dominant role in the planning and implementation of a pasture rotation plan. As a result of the establishment of women's groups they are more involved in community decision making; they participate more in community meetings, freely express their ideas, and report about women's group activities to other members of the community. They have forced changes in the co-management agreements to better reflect women's roles, needs and priorities.<sup>7</sup>

Access to information is highly important for women – knowledge is power. Though women may not be as mobile as men and visit public places less often, they talk and exchange information as they carry out their daily tasks. Meetings can also take place under a tree or round a hearth whilst coffee is brewing. Often women have to rely on a single female representative to bring news from a community meeting or training. Increasingly women are growing confident to speak out against injustices and an abuse of their rights. One such example is the protests made by a group of Bedouin women in Israel against the burning of their women's centre (see Box 5).

## Box 5 Pastoral Protests in Israel

The Association for the Improvement of the Status of Women: Laqiya was established in 1992 by women of a Bedouin village in order to lead social change through the empowerment of Israeli Arab-Bedouin women and the advancement of their status in their own community in particular and in Israeli society in general. The activities of the Association were concentrated in the Desert Embroidery Project, a project that employed and provided a living for 165 women. In May 2005 local people who disapproved of their activities set the Centre on fire. However this did not stop the women. First they wrote a letter of protest highlighting that as a result of this "contemptible incident" 165 women had lost their livelihood and approximately 600 children that benefited from the activities of the Association would have to wait until the Association could return to full operation. The women then called for everyone to come to their village for a march of protest and support that began at the burnt building and continued to the local Municipality Building. Eventually the women did manage to rebuild their Centre and continue to strive for the betterment of Arab-Bedouin women.<sup>8</sup>

International gatherings are also providing important forums for women to share information, advocate for their rights, and build solidarity. The Global Gathering of Women Pastoralists held in November 2010 in Mera, India and organised by IUCN-WISP amongst others, proved to be strong platform for pastoral women's empowerment including the development of a Global Action Plan and Declaration to inform and support the development of pastoralist policies, by the participants.<sup>9</sup>

### *Strategies for empowerment*

Although it may be true that women are excluded from many public decision making processes, women can influence and often do take part in such forums. Women may ridicule, refuse to cook or prepare beer, and reject sexual intercourse to influence their husbands. They can also make use of influential male relatives or make public accusations. What has been read as servility and submission towards elders can rather be interpreted more as silence and respect and an important part of social development.<sup>10</sup> As women get older, they acquire status as good wives, mothers and advisors and their opinion is sought. Often men postpone making decisions within community meetings until they have consulted their wives back home. Raika women of Rajasthan, India for example, do not come forward or speak in the presence of their men. However they are acknowledged as the ones pulling the strings behind the scenes. This is reflected in the proverb:

***Raika men are as straight as a cow, but Raika women are as cunning as a fox.***<sup>11</sup>

Women play a central role in conflict and peacemaking. To maintain peace, women apply a variety of mechanisms. They engage household members in time consuming activities, making them busy so that they have no time to go out and fight. They teach their families the importance of peace, forgiveness and respect for life. Stories are shared on the negative impacts of conflicts. Women speak out against conflict in meetings.<sup>12</sup> Livestock products such as milk<sup>13</sup> even infants (to be nursed by a woman from a different group for a short period of time)<sup>14</sup> may be exchanged. Forms of protest to publicly condemn men's actions or infringements of their rights are used. Somali women may stand for an entire day in the desert without shelter to demand the cessation of conflicts. Alternatively they may uncover their hair throwing down their gambo (scarf given to a woman on marriage) and threaten to shave it off or walk nude through their encampment to demonstrate the seriousness of their concerns.<sup>15</sup>

One Somali woman, Dekha Ibrahim known in her home, Wajir Kenya, as Dekha Nabad ('mother of peace') became an internationally respected peacemaker through her work developing local peace and development committees and through international action. Her story is one of courage and perseverance, combining respect and love for her pastoral home with ambition and drive to resolve peace across the world. In Wajir one of the methods she used was to ask the 60,000 members of a women's organisation who had mobile phones to look out of their windows and report what they saw. The information was used to plot not only the 'hot spots' of the violence but also the 'cold spots'. It was important to know where people were running to so they could be protected.<sup>16</sup>

## Key lessons for policy development and implementation targeted at pastoral women's empowerment

### ***1. A full understanding of gender relations should be the starting point for working with communities***

It is vital that a full understanding of local issues, rights, access, knowledge and power relations (including between men and women) is achieved before support, interventions and/or activities take place. Pastoral men and women have differing



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entitlements and access to resources and command over them, which can be complex, of different types, overlapping and dynamic. Divisions between women and men should be also be identified and taken into account including those related to age, status and education as they impact on how men and women experience and take part in change.

Changes in pastoral systems and their development are likely to cause changes in gender relations too. The processes and impacts of such change need to be understood if appropriate support to women (and men) is to be provided: not all experience change in the same way. Commercialisation for example, can bring advantages for some and disadvantages for others: women may not be able to benefit from commercialisation as cultural norms and values limit their involvement. Commercialisation may steer resources away from women to men, as they become more valuable. Commercialisation may instigate more individualistic attitudes that influence the breakdown of communal social support mechanisms upon which women rely in times of need and the privatisation of resources, and can mean that women can no longer afford access.

Exposure to new ideas, innovations, alternatives and options can help people identify suitable alternatives for development. Learning visits and study tours can help people understand a situation beyond their own community and learn from the experiences of others. Innovative schemes such as 'mentoring'<sup>17</sup> can have positive results.

### ***2. Recognising pastoral women's roles and responsibilities in pastoral social and livelihood systems can help identify appropriate support and interventions***

Pastoralism as an effective functioning land use and social system works best when the community or clan are cohesive and self-supporting. This provides for reciprocal and collective relations, which are vital for the sharing and managing common property resources. Such processes depend upon the support of all members of the community and a common vision and goal for sustainable growth and development.

Though women have their own identity, needs and aspirations, they may have to compromise these for the good of 'the whole' (that is, for the household, the clan or the greater pastoral society itself) and often do. By doing so they may lose some of their rights as individuals, but maintain their rights as part of the pastoral community.

Care needs to be taken when trying to influence women's individual rights, and that their rights as a member of a pastoral community or clan are not damaged. Too much, too rapid and too demanding change may cause the whole pastoral system(s) to collapse leaving women (and men) more vulnerable than before. Often women themselves are best positioned to judge what is an acceptable level of change or not.

Often livestock related tasks cut through many of the 'normal' divisions found in a household or community and can mend cultural, caste and gender divides. Commonalities can be identified and built on to encourage solidarity and consensus.

Livestock related activities can prove to be a good entry point for supporting a greater level of empowerment and can be linked to other aspects of development such as marketing and natural resource management. Further, livestock assets tend to be more equitably distributed than other assets so provide a basis on which to build more equitable access to other property. However it should be recognised that the promotion of one livestock's product (such as meat) can have impacts on the use of and access to other livestock products (such as milk) and can lead to conflict within the household.

### 3. Empowerment is more sustainable and facilitating when it comes from within

'Power' can come from different sources. It can involve an individual or a group. It has been shown that power is most sustainable when it is generated from within – when the person or people concerned generate and obtain power for themselves rather than it being 'given' to them. Women can gain strength from working together. Often women have already achieved a degree of empowerment themselves which should be built upon. The home or household can prove to be an important and comfortable place for women to first gain courage and strength to initiate change.

Power is not easily obtained, however a struggle for power can be an empowering process in itself. When empowerment is unrushed and occurs at a speed that those involved feel comfortable with, it provides greater opportunities for control, acceptance and positive impacts. It also gives more time to contemplate the consequences of, prepare for and adapt to change. If empowerment happens too quickly and/or does not include all who are affected, conflict can arise, resentment and outrage can result, and the success of the empowerment process be compromised.

Achievement of one step to empowerment may not be enough for long-lasting change. Though improving access to productive resources may be of benefit, in order to control those productive resources and optimise their use, a woman is also likely to need tailored training, ongoing appropriate extension services and information, and support in group formation. As such interventions and activities need to be interlinked and integrated, carefully thought out, practical and targeted.

Inhibitors to empowerment exist at different levels and in different contexts, but these should not be seen as barriers but rather as hurdles that need to be overcome. Empowerment can be a protracted, complex and sensitive process that requires commitment, resources and strong partnerships. Innovative, flexible, reflective and adaptive processes may be needed: problems need to be identified early and resolved.

### 4. The right institutional framework and supporting mechanisms are vital to support women's empowerment.

Customary and government bodies can be both protective and restrictive towards women's access to power and control and such as rights over livestock and other resources. It may be more productive to assist women in creating new spaces for women's involvement, participation and representation rather than trying to open up 'old' (male-dominated) ones. However if this is the case then the linkages between the two also need to be built. Emphasis should be placed on developing skills that enable effective communication between such institutions, women and other local groups.

Though it may appear that women do not play a strong role in public decision making processes, there are a number of ways that they influence these. Many decisions seemingly made by their husbands have involved discussions with their wives first. There are often customary mechanisms for women (and men) to voice their views, air grievances and complaints, offer opinions and even protest. Women often play a dominant role in such as conflict resolution and peacemaking, and are highly respected in this.



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Increasingly women are more confident to directly participate in public meetings and the like. International networks and gatherings offer women exposure and opportunities for such as solidarity-building and partnership at a level not previously accessible to them. Because in the past men have dominated the 'public arena,' small steps in women's representation can be highly significant and should be supported. Care needs to be taken in the use of externally imposed quotas for women's representation in mixed groups, committees etc. Internally generated processes of change may have more positive results.

- 1 For example in Afar and Somali regions (pastoral-dominated) of Ethiopia, the 2007 population census showed that there were significantly more numbers of male than females counted – in Afar region of the 1,411,092 total population 55.7% were male and 44.3% female; in Somali region of the 4,439,147 total population 55.6% were male and 44.4% female.
- 2 This report is available in full from: <http://www.iucn.org/wisp/resources/?3627/Report---WOMENS-EMPOWERMENT-IN-PASTORAL-SOCIETIES>.
- 3 Spadacini, B. (2006) "How relevant is context when measuring impact?" in A. Burn et al, *Empowering women? CARE's experience in East and Central Africa*. Kenya: CARE International.
- 4 Hodgson, D. (2000) *Rethinking pastoralism in Africa*. London: James Currey.
- 5 de Bruijn, M. (1997) "The hearthold in pastoral Fulbe society, Central Mali: social relations, milk and drought" *Africa*, Vol 67, Issue 4.
- 6 Sikar, N. and D. Hodgson (2006) "In the shadow of the MDGs: Pastoralist women and children in Tanzania" *Indigenous Affairs*. Vol. 01/06.
- 7 IDRC (2003) Protecting Mongolia's Grassland Steppes. Internet: [http://www.idrc.ca/en/ev-30119-201-1-DO\\_TOPIC.html](http://www.idrc.ca/en/ev-30119-201-1-DO_TOPIC.html)
- 8 Laqiya (2005) *Letter of protest and call for support*. The Association of the Improvement of the Status of Women. Laqiya; and Allen Degen 2008 personal communication.
- 9 See [www.womenpastoralists.com](http://www.womenpastoralists.com)
- 10 Mitzlaff, U. (1988) *Life in a patriarchal society. Field research among the Parakuyo Tanzania*. Trickster Verlag: Tanzania Publishing House.
- 11 Ilse Köhler-Rollefson, personal communication 2008.
- 12 Oxfam GB Uganda (2004) *Capacity building for empowerment review. Kotido, Uganda*. Unpublished report.
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- 15 Elmi, A., D. Ibrahim and J. Jenner (2000) "Women's role in peacemaking in Somali society" in D. Hodgson (ed) *Rethinking Pastoralism in Africa*. London: James Currey.
- 16 Sadly, Dekha Ibrahim died in July 2011 due to injuries sustained in a car crash. Her life story is enlightening – see for example: <http://www.standardmedia.co.ke/InsidePage.php?id=2000042963&cid=620&>
- 17 For example the work of GL-CRSP Parima in northern Kenya and Ethiopia – Desta, S., G. Gebru. S. Tezera and D. Coppock (2006) "Linking pastoralists and exporters in a livestock marketing chain: Recent experiences from Ethiopia" in J. McPeak and P. Little (eds) *Livestock Marketing in Eastern Africa*. UK: ITDG.